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Everybody's

Volume LV
No. 6

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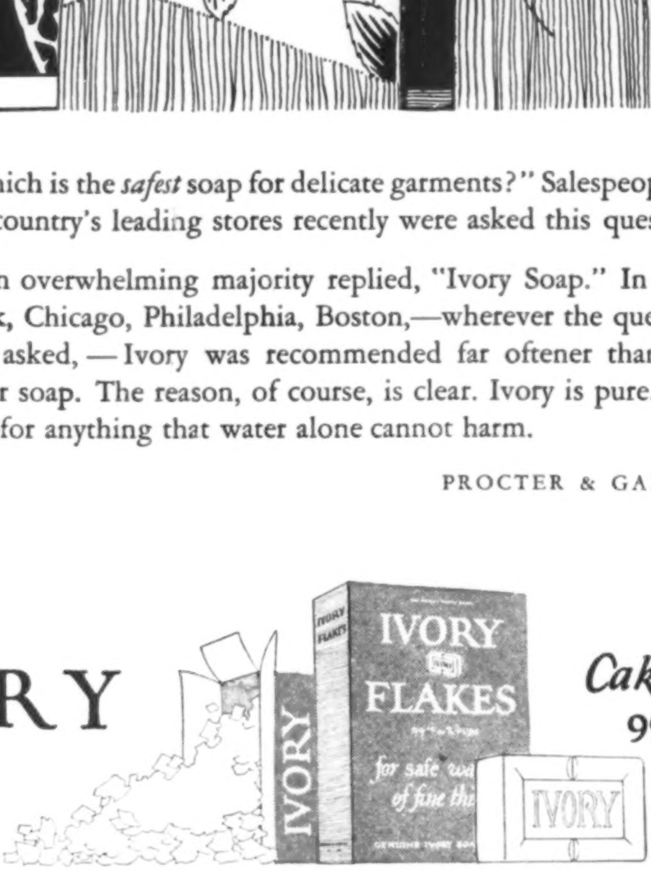

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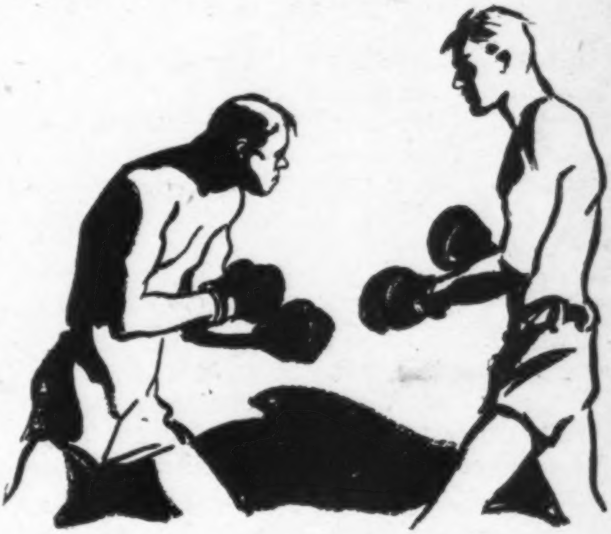
Advertising section continued in rear of book

The Last LINE of Somehow Riley

A story of a Tenderfoot who wasn't at all TENDER



By

Lucian Cary

STRANGE birds come to a dude ranch in Wyoming; but none stranger than the one who came to the Circle Bar that afternoon in August.

It was hot. I was sitting on the veranda listening to Hank Watrous himself on the subject of dudes and dude wrangling and looking out over the valley at the cool peaks of the Medicine Bow. It was so hot you thought twice about reaching for another cigaret. Bessie, the pet bear, was curled up at the foot of a veranda pillar fast asleep; and most of Hank's bear dogs lay in the shade of the only tree with their tongues hanging out; and for once the phonograph in the hall was still and the only sound from within the ranch-house was the slap of the cards as three old maids who had come all the way from Boston to see what the West was like played cutthroat bridge. Which was what they would have done if they had been at home.

Far down the road a solitary man approached on foot. That was odd. Nobody walks in the Medicine Bow country. He was carrying a suit-case. That was odder still. The nearest railway station is at Laramie, forty hard miles away. The man paused and sat on the suit-case and fanned himself with what looked like a straw sailor hat.

"What do you make of it?" Hank asked.

I shook my head.

"Mexican?" Hank asked in a whisper, as the man came within ear-shot.

"Vaudeville," I guessed, under my breath.

The stranger set the suit-case down. His shoes were broken; his suit was stained with grease; his face was a pale olive where the sweat had run down through the dust on it; and every line of his posture said that he was a tired and beaten man. Only the suit-case preserved its original glory. It still looked as if it might have been bought in Bond Street the week before; a handsome case of fine leather, with heavy brass locks, with the pasters of Paris and London hotels on one side and the initials "B. L." on the end in large black letters.

"I WANNA see the boss," he said in the unmistakable accent of New York.

"Third Avenue," I mumbled to Hank.

"Stranger," Hank said slowly, "I'm the boss of this outfit."

The stranger rolled a pair of appealing brown eyes at Hank, eyes as big and liquid and humble as the eyes of a setter dog who has got in bad and wants only to be forgiven.

"Chief," he said huskily, "I wanna job—any job—any kind of a job that's good for coffee and cakes."

He sank slowly, like a man who can no longer stand, until he sat on the suit-case. His head dropped on his chest. His body drooped with exhaustion.

"Brother," Hank asked, "How'd you get here?"

Again the stranger rolled those incredibly big brown eyes up at Hank.

"Walk," he said. "Hoofed it." His head dropped back on his chest. He looked as if he were too completely exhausted ever to get up from his seat on the suit-case.

Bessie woke up and with a bear's clumsy celerity approached the stranger and licked his hand. She was used to getting lumps of sugar from guests at the Circle Bar and Bessie did not distinguish between guests and strangers. The dead-tired man took one look at Bessie and came to life. In one jump he reached the huddle of bear dogs. In two jumps he reached the tree. It was not a large tree.

Bessie ambled toward the tree. The older dogs got up, stretched themselves, yawned. Two or three of the younger ones began to bark. They knew enough to let Bessie alone, and not to bark at guests of the Circle Bar. But what about guests who climbed trees? Bessie proceeded deliberately up the tree. The brown-eyed stranger emitted a cry—a heart-rending cry.

Hank got up and strolled over to the tree.

"Take it easy, brother," he said to the stranger. "That's a pet bear. She won't hurt you." He grabbed Bessie by her tail. "Come down out of that," he said gruffly. Bessie came down. The stranger remained perched in the fork of the tree. "You, too," Hank said to him.

The stranger came down with great caution. He consented to touch foot to the ground only when Hank had shooed Bessie away.

FIVE minutes earlier the ranch-house had seemed deserted. But now two China boy cooks peered with delighted grins from the kitchen windows; the three old maids from Boston had left their cards where they lay and came out to see what was going on; and Big Bill Russell, the head horse wrangler, came round the corner of the ranch-house at a lope, followed by four college-boy waiters and six débutantes.

Hank ignored the excitement. He looked as grave as if nothing had happened. He led the stranger into his office and signaled to me to follow. We went in and shut the door and sat down.

"Now," Hank said, "what's your name?"

"Riley," the stranger answered.

"You don't look like a Riley to me," Hank said. "You might be a Jew or a wop or a Greek but not a Riley."

"My mother was a Riley," said the stranger. "Honest she was, chief."

"And somehow you'd rather go as your mother's son than your father's?"

The stranger nodded.

"All right, Somehow Riley," Hank went on, "where'd you come from?"

"Noo Yawk."

"What's the matter with your ear?"

The stranger started as if in fright. For the first time I noticed that his left ear was practically covered by a strip of surgeon's plaster. He touched the ear gently. The part that was exposed looked as if it had been parboiled. It was curiously swollen and thick.

"Nothing," he said stubbornly.

"Are you broke?"

The stranger's answer was to turn out his pockets. They were empty.

Hank reached over and tapped his breast and hip.

"Haven't got a gun?"

The stranger shook his head.

"What's that in your breast pocket?"

The stranger pulled out a leather case and handed it to Hank. It contained nothing but a photograph of a buxom girl with black curly hair.

"What kind of work can you do?"

The stranger turned his hat round and round in his hands, contemplating the unfortunate separation between the crown and the brim.

"Come clean," Hank suggested.

"Chief," the stranger said, and for the third time he rolled those big brown eyes appealingly at Hank, "I've been a waiter—honest I have."

"All right," Hank said, "you get the job. Come with me."

Hank led the way out to the bunk-house,

where the help slept and ate and played the ukulele.

"Boys," he said, "this is Somehow Riley. He says he's a waiter. We'll see about that in the morning. Just now he wants a bath and a square meal and ten hours' sleep."

Back in Hank's office I asked him why he took a chance on Somehow Riley.

"What chance?" Hank asked.

"Well," I said, "he might be some kind of a crook."

Hank shook his head.

"He hasn't got the nerve. Besides," Hank reflected, irrelevantly, "he's just a boy. He can't be more than twenty-one or twenty-two."

"Do you suppose he really is a waiter?"

"Yes," Hank said, "he's a waiter. He wouldn't have had the nerve to pretend he was if he wasn't."

Hank muttered something to himself about those big brown eyes.

"If he isn't a waiter," Hank concluded, "I'll fire him as soon as he's had a week to feed himself up in."

SOMEHOW RILEY proved himself a better waiter than the college boys on summer vacations we were used to at the Circle Bar. He might have got on peacefully enough if it had not been for his absurd entrance. The whole ranch had seen him up a tree while poor old Bessie followed him in search of her accustomed lumps of sugar. He had apparently never been outside a large city before in his life, much less to a country like the Medicine Bow. The help proceeded to take out all the irritations generated by the art of dude wrangling on the dude from Third Avenue. From Big Bill Russell down to the China boy cooks they razzed him.

Somehow took it all so meekly that Hank was disgusted. One morning Somehow was five minutes late in arriving at Hank's table to serve him breakfast.

"What's the matter?" Hank asked.

"Nothing, chief," Somehow answered. "I just had to change my clothes."

"What for?"

"They were wet."

"How'd they get wet?"

"Chief," Somehow said, "it was just an accident."

"Come clean," Hank insisted.

"Well, chief," Somehow admitted, "some of those college boys put a bucket of water up above the bunk-house door with a string to it. They spilled it on me when I opened the door."

"Look here, Somehow," Hank said mildly, "why don't you stop this sort of thing."

"How, chief?"

"Take a poke at one of them," Hank said. "Just naturally haul off and hit the next fellow that bothers you. Hit him on the jaw."

Somehow Riley shook his head. He smiled a wan smile.

"I couldn't do that, chief."

So Hank let the boys plague him.

ONE day, after a month or so, a big flat-footed man dropped off the stage and asked for a room overnight. Hank gave it to him. He gave his name as James J. Riordan. It was plain enough that he was there to have a look at Somehow Riley. He watched Somehow all through dinner and next morning he made a point of sitting at one of the tables Somehow served.

"What do you make of that?" Hank asked me.

"He's what they call a flat-foot in New York," I said.

"Meaning a detective?"

I nodded.

After breakfast Mr. Riordan came over to our table and asked Hank if he might see him.

"Sit down, brother," Hank said.

Mr. Riordan jerked a thumb at me.

"That's all right," Hank assured him.

"What I wanted to know," Mr. Riordan continued in a husky voice which he produced without moving his lips, "is where you got that waiter."

"He just came," Hank said, "about a month ago."

Mr. Riordan produced the card of a New York detective agency. Hank examined the card gravely.

"Well," he asked, "what's the boy done?"

"Nothing," Mr. Riordan confided huskily. "Nothing crooked anyway. But his folks are looking for him, see? I thought you might keep an eye on him till they get here."

"I might," Hank said, "and then again I might not."

The detective rose.

"It would be a favor to everybody concerned," he said.

"I think he'll be here for another week or two," Hank assured him.

"Now," Hank said, when the detective had gone, "what do you make of that?"

"Somebody must have money," I said.

THE fat man came just a week later, to the day. He looked as if he might be a ward boss for Tammany Hall. He carried a cigar in one corner of his mouth and talked out of the other corner. He came straight to the point.

"Mr. Watrous," he said to Hank, when he had registered, "you have a waiter named Riley."

"Somehow Riley," Hank said.

"I don't wish the boy any harm," the fat man said, and he looked Hank in the eye.

"But—" Hank prompted.

The stranger grinned.

"I'd like it a lot if I could sit at one of his tables in the morning."

"All right," Hank said.

Hank and I were down early the next morning to see what we could see. We'd finished our breakfast when the fat man came down. Somehow was out of the room at the moment. Hank indicated a table next ours. The fat man sat down. He was sitting there studying the menu when Somehow came back. Somehow didn't recognize him till he leaned over his shoulder to ask for his order. The fat man looked up at Somehow.

"Bennie," he said, "I'll have ham and eggs."

Somehow Riley's body stiffened.

"I won't go back," he said, with the first sign of spirit he had shown since he came to the Circle Bar.

"I haven't asked you to go back, Bennie," the fat man said. "I just want to talk to you."

Somehow Riley stood there, his chest heaving.

"How's your ear, Bennie?" the fat man asked.

Involuntarily, Somehow Riley raised his hand to his left ear. It was still almost concealed with surgeon's plaster. Somehow put a fresh piece of plaster on every night.

"Not so good," he said to the fat man.

"I wouldn't worry so much about it if I were you," the fat man said pleasantly. "If you ask me I think Rosie was just kidding you. It's a way women have."

Somehow turned and went out into the kitchen. For the first time, watching him, it occurred to me that there was something curiously solid and powerful about the boy. He wasn't built like a waiter.

"Now what do you make of that?" Hank asked.

I shook my head.

"It's beyond me," I said'

The fat man finished his breakfast in leisurely fashion, lit a fresh cigar, and strolled out on the veranda. He stood teetering back and forth on his heels and looking out over the valley at the cool peaks of the Medicine Bow.

"Some view you've got, Mr. Watrous," he said.

Hank nodded.

Big Bill Russell came out to see Hank.

"Boss," he said, "the boys all want to go to Laramie tonight. There's a fight on."

"What kind of a fight?"

"A prize-fight," Big Bill explained. "It seems as how there's a professional heavyweight who offers to give any man who can stay three rounds with him a hundred dollars."

"Think he's going to find any takers, Bill?"

Bill grinned.

"I want a try for that hundred dollars myself."

The fat man looked at Bill appraisingly. Bill stood six feet of solid bone and muscle.

"Ever do any fighting?" the fat man asked Bill.

"Some," Bill said.

"I mean professionally," the fat man said.

Bill shook his head.

"I'd just like to try it," he said. "From what I hear this Battling Bannister doesn't weigh any more than I do."

"Well," Hank said, "it's your own funeral. If the boys want to see you get what's coming to you I guess I'd better let 'em."

"I'd like to go myself," the fat man said.

"We might all go," I said to Hank.

"We could leave the China boys and Somehow Riley in charge of the place," Hank said. "There aren't so many guests that Somehow couldn't serve them all."

So it was agreed. It takes nearly two hours to drive that forty miles to Laramie even if there isn't any traffic. We planned to start at six o'clock.

THE fat man had a long talk with Somehow Riley that afternoon and when it was over he came into Hank's office.

"Mr. Watrous," he said, "that Somehow boy is an old friend of mine. I wish he could go along tonight. Isn't there some way I could make it right with you?"

Hank figured he could get two of the chambermaids to serve dinner that night and accommodate the fat man. So when we piled into the three flivvers and the ton truck, Somehow was among those present. I remember noticing he had some kind of a bundle under his arm.

The ring was pitched outdoors at the baseball grounds. They'd put in some new seats and hung some electric lights and everybody was there. It looked as if we wouldn't get near enough the ring to see anything. But the fat man worked some kind of game. The Circle Bar outfit got ring-side seats.

Battling Bannister's manager was the sort of bird you'd see handling prize-fighters at Madison Square Garden in New York, or anywhere else. He stood in the middle of the ring and announced that his man would box a three-round exhibition with his sparring partner and after that Battling Bannister would take on any and all comers. If any man lasted three rounds with him, he would take down one hundred dollars in cash money.

"What is more," the raucous little manager continued, "we have with us tonight Mr. Pat Mulhaley of New York, the well-known promoter and manager. Mr. Mulhaley has kindly consented to referee."

With that the fat man got up from his seat beside Somehow Riley and climbed into the ring. He took off his coat and waistcoat and hung them on a post. From the pocket of his waistcoat he took a watch.

"Is there a gong?" he asked.

"There's an automobile horn," said the little manager.

"I'll ask Mr. Watrous to keep time," the fat man roared. Hank got up and took the watch from the fat man.

"It's a stop-watch, Mr. Watrous," he explained, and showed Hank the place to press the lever that started and stopped it.

The horn was screwed to the platform. It was the kind you blow by hitting it with your hand.

"Now," the fat man said, "we'll start with a toot from the horn. Start the watch at the same time and when three minutes are up, hit the bell hard."

BATTLING BANNISTER and his sparring partner climbed into the ring and threw off their bathrobes. Battling Bannister looked as if he weighed close to two hundred. He looked as big and as mean as Jim Jeffries. His sparring partner was a good deal lighter. They put on three fairish rounds in which the sparring partner did all the boxing and Battling Bannister did all the hitting. The crowd was impressed.

The little manager took the center of the ring after the third round.

"Now," he said, "What boy would like to win a hundred dollars? We offer one hundred dollars to the man who can stay three rounds with us." He held up a roll of yellow-backed bills.

Nobody moved for a full minute. Then Big Bill Russell got up. The little manager congratulated him. Bill climbed into the ring and pulled off his coat and his shirt. He was wearing a pair of sneakers. The fat man helped him put on the gloves. Hank blew the horn.

We all saw that Bill didn't have a chance. He was game and willing. But the professional was fast and clever enough to hit Bill whenever and wherever he liked. Bill couldn't touch him at all. Battling Bannister was satisfied to cuff and slap him around during the first three minutes, making sure just what Bill had. He made Bill's nose bleed and opened a cut over one eye and knocked the wind out of him a couple of times but did him no real damage.

The second round was a different matter. Battling Bannister charged across the ring. Bill started a right swing. Battling Bannister came inside it with a straighter blow. Bill went down. He was game. He started to get right up. Somebody yells "Take your time." The fat man in his shirt sleeves who had turned out to be Mr. Pat Mulhaley of New York began the count. Bill got up on the count of nine. Battling Bannister let him have it then. He knocked Bill half way across the ring. It took a couple of buckets of cold water to bring him to.

The little manager took the center of the ring again and repeated his announcement — a hundred dollars to the man who could stay three rounds with Battling Bannister.

"Are there no takers?" yelled the little manager. "Isn't there a big rough boy here who would like to show what he could do."

Nobody appeared. The crowd had seen what happened to Bill and realized that no amateur, however strong and willing, had much of a chance with this professional bruiser. I looked out over the crowd. Across the way I saw a girl with a woman who looked as if she might be her mother. There were a number of women sprinkled through the crowd. But something about this girl's face caught my attention. I wondered where I had seen her before. But just then I heard the voice of the fat man.

"What about this boy?" the fat man roared.

I looked at the ring. There was Somehow Riley, with his hand on the arm of the speech-making little manager, trying timidly to attract his attention. The little manager turned and looked Somehow Riley up and down.

"Why," he said, "you're too small. You're outweighed fifty pounds. You can't fight a heavyweight."

"I'd like to try it," Somehow said.

The little manager turned to the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he yelled, "this boy wants his chance at the hundred dollars. I tell him he's too small. It wouldn't be fair to put him in the same ring with Battling Bannister. What do you say?"

"No—no—no," came from all over the crowd.

"You see," the little manager said to Somehow Riley.

The fat man raised his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he roared, "it looks like slaughter to put this boy up against a man as big as Battling Bannister. But I know the boy. I think he's got an even chance to keep away from the big man for three rounds. Speaking as a friend of his I'd like to see him try it. I promise you it will be worth seeing. What do you say?"

Somebody in the crowd yelled "yes." Mr. Pat Mulhaley took it for assent. Somehow Riley pulled off his shirt, dropped his trousers to his ankles and stepped out of them clad in nothing but a pair of green fighting trunks and a pair of boxing shoes.

The little manager bustled around, his face alive with suspicion.

"What's this boy's name?" he asked.

"He's fighting tonight under the name of Somehow Riley," Mr. Mulhaley told him.

"Well, I wanna know," the little manager said. "I wanna know who he is."

"You aren't afraid he'll knock your heavyweight for a goal, are you?" Mr. Mulhaley asked him.

"I wanna know," the little manager said. "I wanna know."

"I see," Mulhaley answered, "you're worrying about your hundred dollars. You are afraid this boy can run away from him for three rounds and you'll have to pay."

The crowd was getting excited now for the first time. The little manager heard the murmur of it. He knew crowds. He had no mind to quarrel with one—not in Laramie, Wyoming.

Mr. Mulhaley laced the gloves on Somehow Riley's hands, waved his hand at Hank. The horn tooted.

WHAT is it that makes you know? You see a man pick up a shotgun and you know he can or can't shoot. You see a man put his foot in the stirrup and you know he can or can't ride.

We saw Somehow Riley face to face with Battling Bannister and it looked like slaughter. We saw the first exchange and we knew it wasn't. Somehow Riley was back home.

The big fellow rushed him with the toot of the horn as if he were going to drive him right out of the ring. And so he would have if Somehow had been there, waiting for him. He just wasn't. He stepped aside, and the big man went by like a locomotive.

Battling Bannister checked himself, turned, and rushed again, both arms swinging. Any one of those swings would have stopped the fight right there if it had landed. But none landed. Again the boy stepped aside and this time he clipped the big man on the nose as he went past. Nobody saw the blow start. No eye can follow the right hook of a really fast lightweight. But everybody saw the stream of blood flowing over Battling Bannister's chin.

The big man turned and advanced cautiously this time. The blow hadn't hurt him. But he had begun to realize that his problem was to catch the boy. He kept feinting and swinging wide, ready to cut off the boy's attempt to sidestep. The boy gave ground slowly, ducking the swings with a weave of his shoulders, ducking them by an inch or two. The big man hadn't hit him. But he was giving ground. He was being slowly but surely backed into a corner.

The crowd saw it. The crowd saw that in another thirty seconds the boy would be in the corner, pinned in the corner. One of those big right-handed swings would smash his guard down and the next would knock him cold. It looked inevitable. It looked so inevitable that I sat on the edge of my seat wanting to warn him, wanting to yell at him, and knowing it was no use. The ring was too small. The ring wasn't more than eighteen feet square. There wasn't room for the boy to get away.

You couldn't hear anything but the quick shuffle of their feet. You knew that in another fifteen seconds it would be all over. And when at last the boy was in the corner and the big man stood covering him with his great arms and measuring him for one of those big swings the crowd gave a kind of sigh.

YOU couldn't really see what happened. If I thought I saw it was only because I once saw a motion picture taken at enormous speed and shown slowly. The eye of the camera saw what no man can see—what happens when a light-weight fighter puts everything he has into a punch. It begins way down at the ankles; it ripples up through calf and thigh and loin. It surges through an arched back, tense as a bow. And the whole weight and speed of the body goes behind a flying fist.

What we did see was that Somehow Riley stepped just inside the big man's swing, stepped so little inside that his glove going past took the surgeon's plaster from his ear. The big man straightened up as Somehow Riley's right fist sank deep in his mid-section. We heard a thud and the grunt of surprise. Then we heard a snap, like the sound of bone on bone. Somehow Riley's left had caught the big man fair on the button, and down he went, like a falling tree.

Mr. Mulhaley began to count. At the count of six the big man stirred. At eight he got to his knees. At the count of ten Hank Watrous, honest man that he was and is, tooted the horn.

"You're out," said Mr. Mulhaley to Battling Bannister.

The next moment the little manager shot across the ring, raised Battling Bannister to his feet, and shouted insults at Mr. Mulhaley.

"You big bum," he yelled. "You big bum. That isn't any Somehow Riley. That isn't any ham fighter. That's Benny Lasky—the world's champion light-weight."

Mr. Mulhaley just grinned. The Circle Bar outfit piled into the ring. But they didn't get there ahead of the girl I'd noticed. She threw her arms around Somehow Riley's neck and kissed him.

"Oh, Benny," she wailed, "Benny, Benny, Benny! I don't care about your ear. It's all right with me."

I don't know just how I got into the ring myself. But I was there. I looked at Somehow Riley's ear. It was a cauliflower ear.

"You see," Mr. Mulhaley explained to me, "the boy got that ear in his fight on the fourth of July. It broke his heart. He'd always figured he was too clever for that. And Rose had told him she wouldn't marry him if he got himself marred up. And so he ran away to hide himself."

Big Bill Russell, his swollen face one wide grin, grabbed Somehow Riley's hand.

"Boy," he said, "boy, that was great, that was wonderful. But tell me, why did you let us put it over you? Why didn't you hit me? Why didn't you punch my face? You could have knocked me cold."

Somehow Riley smiled his wan smile, his big brown eyes rolling upward, and gravely shook his head.

"I don't fight with amachoors," said Somehow Riley.

The DIAMOND

DAVID SHAW GOULD, sitting on the bench by Waterloo Bridge, was cold; the day had been sultry but a chill summer rain had fallen in the evening, making the streets dismal and the opposite bank of the river misty to the view. The dim shapes of the bleak warehouses were dimmer and bleaker than usual and the dotted lights of street lamps and barge lanterns flickered in their reflections on the slow water with an odd cheerlessness. The young man shivered and turned his eyes from them. The only thing in the world that gave him the vaguest comfort was an electric sign of a gigantic Scot who placarded a tall tower on the opposite bank and imbibed whisky from an inexhaustible tumbler. By watching him closely and employing auto-suggestion one could often obtain a measure of his obvious delight for oneself.

But tonight, the seventh night the young man had spent on the bench, that occupation was unsatisfying, perhaps, because he had realized that drinking on an empty stomach, even in imagination, then, was not beneficial; perhaps because his natural optimism, the last thing that had remained with him, was deserting him. Hunger, he discovered, was the most desperate torture of all, and he had learnt in the course of the last six months, not a few of the others, chief among them the horrid devil of uncertainty.

David Shaw Gould had killed a man, or, to put it more exactly, the police were of the opinion that he had killed a man, and in his extremity it amounted to much the same thing. He was in no condition to argue the point. He had no clothes, no money, and further no desire for fight, three most necessary aids to such an argument.

It had happened on the second of August, a matter of eight days ago, after he had had his final interview with a corpulent gentleman named Reuben Lipsheimer, a man of keen business acumen. The interview had terminated a little abruptly in the Jew's house in Half Moon Street at one o'clock in the morning. Six hours later the newspapers assured the world that at about one o'clock Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer had been shot through the head with a .25 automatic pistol.

It was both providential and unfortunate. The world had lost a rogue but acquired a murderer.

The first thing David Shaw Gould had done was surreptitiously to drop a .25 automatic pistol, his sole remaining piece of personal property, into the Thames and move from his accustomed bench on Blackfriars embankment to a less comfortable one by Waterloo Bridge.

Beginning a Novel of Mystery and the Cleverest Crooks in England

MAKERS

By Selwyn Jepson

He was quite sure in his own mind that he had not released Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer from his well-grown flesh, but he could not, optimistic as he might be, believe that the Metropolitan Police would share his conviction. And although he would have welcomed death in the sense that it would have solved the innumerable problems of existence with which he wrestled, he could not bring himself to look with favor upon the idea of playing scapegoat in the posthumous affairs of Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer. The money-lender had not had a sufficiently attractive personality.

During the week that had elapsed since the murder he had much leisure for thought. He had neither work, food nor money to offer distraction from the process of solving the mystery of Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer. He did not believe that thinking about it would bring him nearer truth in the matter, but he could not forget it. The sight of policemen—and never had there seemed to be so many of them on the embankment—inevitably reminded him of it.

He had visited the money-lender many times in the last year and always on the same errand; to persuade the Jew that the pearls on which his mother had borrowed money had been truly and honestly redeemed before she died. He knew that they had been; she had assured him of it ten times in the last twenty minutes of her life. "Mr. Lipsheimer had the money a week ago," she said, "and the receipt and the pearls will be here soon. I took the money to him myself. It was all I had left."

This had been in the Pimlico boarding-house—he could see the rough position of it from where he sat—and the hurried journey thither in response to the doctor's message was still fresh in his mind. He had not seen her since the smash that had followed the failure of the big city company in the ruins of which his father had been involved. The smash had caused the old man's suicide. The pearls had gone into the safe of Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer in exchange for an insignificant amount of cash with which to pay an accumulation of bills.

That accomplished, his mother had given all her energies, and probably her life, to the task of redeeming them. He had helped as much as he could out of the meager earnings he had received as a ledger-clerk, in a Birmingham accountant's office—London, with the story of the catastrophe ready to every man's tongue wherever he turned, had been impossible then. Now it was in keeping with his mood. He had tried his hand at a dozen jobs, and lost them either because they were temporary ones in the first place or because his employers found him unsatisfactory. They had found him preoccupied, as indeed he was, for try as he would he could not discover a means of prying Lipsheimer's greasy fingers from £40,000 worth of pearl necklace.

HE HAD no claim, since there had been no acknowledgment of the redeeming money. Lipsheimer, who knew the circumstances of the case, had been able to see with very little astuteness that once the money had been paid there would be no more left for a fight, legal or otherwise. Also he had been incalculably aided in his swindle by Mrs. Gould's timely death, for she was the one person in the world who could say "I, personally, paid him the money." The money lender had known it, and David Shaw Gould had known it, and on this their one-sided negotiations had been based.

The last interview had been dynamic. The young man, long despairing of ever getting face to face with the Jew in his city office, had taken to confronting him in his house in Half Moon Street. At about midnight on August the second he had battered his way past the one man servant, who had opened the door, and walked into the money-lender's study.

Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer had not been pleased to see him; indeed he had worn an air of guilt that had surprised the young man considerably. He assumed that it was because he had taken him by surprise. For a little under an hour he had sat in the darkness outside the circle of the reading lamp over the desk and contemplated the money-lender beyond the muzzle of the automatic pistol which now lay in the mud a few hundred yards away. At frequent intervals he had told Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer what he thought about him and what he intended to do to him when he had finished. He certainly stated his hope of being permitted to shoot him.

Mr. Lipsheimer had not been without a measure of courage. He had pooh-poohed the pistol and denied ever having received payment of the loan. He also pointed out what sort of trouble the young and impetuous friend was going to get into if he did not go away at once and quickly. He had then covertly pushed a bell-button at the edge of the desk, presumably to summon the butler.

Then, at a moment when the young man was beginning to think that he was making his point, the light went out and Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer's soft and well-oiled voice became harsh as he explained that not only was he sheltered by the desk but also he held a revolver which he could use. Now would Mr. Gould be pleased to go away?

The surprise had been too much for the young man. If he had been less hungry he might have been more strong in determination; he might even have shot and chanced it. As it was his spirit failed him and he sagged toward the door and down the stairs into the street, passing forever out of Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer's life. It had been weak and inexcusable after the nerve of his preliminary operations, and he had trudged back to his bench on Blackfriars embankment in a mood of bitter self-condemnation.

THE *News* of the the following morning had been little short of catastrophic, for apart from the danger in which it placed him, all further likelihood of regaining the pearls had vanished with the soul of Mr. Lipsheimer. One of the details of the account was that the safe in the wall behind the money-lender's desk had been opened with his own key and the contents taken away. And David was as sure as ever he had been of anything in his life, that the pearls had been in that safe. Why, he could not have explained, he was just morally and completely certain.

Finally, David wandered as far from the river as Leicester Square, got a little stiffly to his feet and made for Northumberland Avenue and the world of affairs, only, at last to return.

On the bench by Waterloo Bridge, he met the first chapter of his future destiny. It introduced itself, by way of a foreword, as a smell. It was a smell that brought David up all standing while he sought the reason for it. A smell that caught the wind, so to speak, and held it still. And David looked at the back view of a remarkably stout man of needy appearance, crowned with a square bowler hat, who was sitting in the middle of the bench with hands crossed over a voluminous lower chest—a lower chest that might well have belonged to any member of the great class of comparatively well-fed. A newspaper package protruded from the left-hand pocket of the man's coat, and it was from this that David decided the aroma must come.

His first suspicion, founded on the extreme squareness of the bowler hat, was that the trespasser was a policeman in plain clothes, but they were too plain, even for a policeman. Besides, the smell—no policeman—

HE SEATED himself on the end of the bench and bade the fat man a "good evening" in the approved fashion, which included the use of the word "mate." The man turned his head, revealing his face in the light of the street lamp. His complexion was fresh to a point of rosiness which at times would be purple, thick black eyebrows formed an unbroken line across the middle of his face dividing it into two utterly dissimilar halves. The upper was a flat uneventful forehead, the lower occupied by a nose, mouth and chin which disagreed one with another, as much, probably, as any three features could disagree. The nose was bulbous, the mouth thin, like a straight line, while the chin, under a week's growth of black beard, was solid and square with a deep cleft down the center, which to David seemed a fissure dividing some lichened rock.

But of all, the eyes most attracted David's attention, because, unlike the rest of the face, he could not see them. Not only were they lost in a tangled undergrowth of eyebrow but also they were small and buried deep in the sockets. They were the most furtive and retiring eyes in the world, and David, weary as he was, felt worried and anxious because he could not see them. They were turned on him, now, and he could sense the scrutiny with which they were occupied. He was aware of a feeling of suspense. In the midst of the period of silence that followed, the fat man cleared his throat slightly and uttered two words in a high, cracked voice which effectively broke the spell he seemed to be exercising. They were nothing out of the ordinary in the way of words; indeed all he said was "good evening", but the queer finality in his voice was oppressive. It was as though he commanded the judgments of the universe and delivered them seldom. His "good evening" was in the nature of one of them; and from his tone he had expelled it from his psychological system with reluctance.

DAVID waited, relaxing his body and finding the usual places for his vertebræ in the gaps of the back of the bench. Having thus succeeded in obtaining a maximum of comfort with a minimum of muscular tension he eyed the new acquaintance with speculative interest. He sniffed the smell and wondered if his surmise as to its origin could be correct. It seemed on examining the man to be scarcely likely, for although the newcomer was to a certain extent needy he was not so destitute that he would permit his educated palate—and he was an educated man from his voice—to be tickled by the food that David thought he smelt in the newspaper package.

Suddenly the man spoke, in the same high voice.

"What do you think of the view from here?"

David was startled by this descent to banality after the impressive and sinister opening, but he was a little relieved too. Melodrama, like whisky, is not good on an empty stomach.

"It is better from the sixth floor of the Savoy," he said, and indicated the massive building behind them by a jerk of his head.

"Every view is better from the sixth floor of the Savoy," observed the fat man, "whether you can see it or not."

David admitted it, and allowed his eyes to stray again toward the package in the pocket. It fascinated him. The other deserted philosophy with a question which was both unexpected and promising.

"Have you dined yet?" he inquired.

David discovered a streak of grim humor.

"I had a—snack, a small and I might say insignificant snack an hour or so ago," he replied. "My friend Mr. Dewar"—he nodded toward the indefatigable Scot across the river—"is very good to me. He fortifies me considerably. He closes at midnight I think."

The fat man suddenly slapped his knee.

"Excellent! Excellent!"

"But not so heartening when one faces the actual facts."

"No. Of course not. But you misunderstood me. My ejaculation was due merely to professional interest. I once held the editorship of a big daily newspaper. A very big daily newspaper. Your point appealed to me in my former capacity. We believed in what was known as sob-stuff. You would have made a good serial. The misused, misunderstood hero starving on an electric sign. Beautiful. Beautiful."

"I suppose so," said David, who could not bring himself to share the fat man's enthusiasm.

"You are, of course, starving," suggested the other.

DAVID admitted it as a fact that was being more and more forcibly presented to him.

"Then tonight," announced the fat man returning to what David mentally called his "crack of doom" voice, "tonight you wiil not sleep hungry. You may, as the hero of a serial I shall never commission, dine with me. You shall have half." And with a swift movement he dragged the newspaper parcel from his pocket and began to unwrap it on his knees. The smell increased in ferocity.

"Look at him!" said the fat man with the air of a conjurer. "He's the best I've had for a fortnight! The finest, the tastiest, the most succulent haddock that was ever smoked and cooked for a white man's dinner!"

David, his suspicions and speculation proved and tried, regarded a flat and unhappy looking member of the *anacanthini* tribe. As a haddock it might not be all that it's owner claimed for it but as food for a hungry man it was beyond all dispute a brilliant and magnificent success.

In the middle of the silent orgy he spoke.

"This is not your last haddock?"

"Mercifully, yes."

"Then—?"

"Tomorrow," said the fat man, "I occupy a position of responsibility and trust to which there is attached a stipend that will enable me to indulge in a more palatable diet."

"You've got a job," said David, and delicately divided a piece of haddock with his fingers.

"Yes. And by the way, in the course of it I am looking for a man. One way and another, I think you'll do, for you seem to me to be of average intelligence, appreciative of discipline by reason of a keen realization of which side your bread is buttered on. You've been without the butter, and the bread, too, for that matter, long enough to have learnt the importance of that principle in human relationships and human activity generally. I was instructed to find that sort of man for some job they have in mind—"

David was now breathing softly through his nose in an effort to quiet the effects of a sudden laxity in his nervous system. He was but dimly aware of what the man was saying except in so far as it contradicted his fears of the previous moment. The specter of justice and its contraptions faded, and the warm, gratified sensation returned to his interior. He faced the world again. The other finished.

"—I think the best thing for you to do is to come and have a look into the matter. What do you say?"

David bolted the last of the haddock, and said stoutly:

"Of course I'll look into it. I'm in deadly need of something, and I'm not in a position to pick and choose, God knows!"

"Good!" remarked the fat man. "Then if you'll stagger along with me, we'll see what can be done. Mind you, I know next to nothing about the job, but it's sure to be more or less permanent, which I gather is the kind you want."

"I do."

"Well then, let us first inter the bones of our dinner."

And forthwith he carefully wrapped up in the newspaper those parts of miraculous fish which man is not fitted by nature to consume, and dropped the parcel over the side of the embankment into the black river below.

David sighed as they turned away. It occurred to him that the beginning and the end of a miracle in which he was concerned would not have been enacted anywhere but by the river. The thought induced a further flood of optimism. Perhaps this was at last the turning of the tide in his affairs. Who knew but this haddock-eating friend might not lead him into the paths of life, fortune and security, above all into security.

The direction taken by the stout man was northward from the river up Northumberland Avenue, and, at a point half-way to Trafalgar Square between tall buildings which proclaimed flats of an exaggerated luxuriousness.

Within seven minutes of leaving his bench, David found himself in a lift moving heavenward past softly lighted corridors, and within eight, admitted with his companion, into the top flat, high above the world by an impassive, elderly butler to whom the fat man whispered a few words.

THEY waited in a sitting-room, furnished in Chippendale and old-rose with the smallest of water-colors above the rather severe lines of the mantelpiece.

David was aware of the fat man gazing over his shoulder.

"There's a great poem yet to be written about that," he said suddenly. "I knew a man who could have done it, but he died."

"Starvation, I suppose."

"No; he became the editor of a poetry magazine and passed the rest of his days wallowing in mediocre verse."

It was on David's lips to tell the man that he had never come across anybody with quite such an unexpected mind, when the door opened and the butler reappeared.

"Would you step this way please?" he said, and they obeyed.

David found himself in a large, oval room, of an even more luxurious and pleasing setting than the sitting-room. The first thing which attracted his attention, however, was a heavy curtain which cut off the further end of the room, and spoilt the symmetry of the whole. In a moment a voice, coming from beyond the curtain, broke the silence of the room. It was a man's voice of deep timbre, and not unpleasant despite the mystery of its origin. The unseen man did not waste time. He got to the crux of the matter in his first sentence.

"Who is that you've got there, Mr. Blenkiron?"

The fat man folded his hands complacently over his extravagant lower chest, in no wise surprised at the phenomenon of the unexpected voice.

"The new man," he said. "Briefly is he starving, therefore eager; intelligent, therefore usable; young, therefore alert, and energetic."

"Name?" queried the man behind the curtain.

Mr. Blenkiron screwed his head round and raised his eyebrows at the young man.

"David," said David Gould with incomplete accuracy.

There was a moment's silence, during which he decided that the interrogator was writing down these details concerning him. He felt like a recruit at a recruiting office.

"Are you willing to undertake a sedentary job with Professor Massaroon in his laboratory at Sommerford Keynes, Mr. David? You will have to look after his reports, assist him in his work if he needs it, and generally act as his man-of-all-work. Five pounds a week. Will you undertake it?"

"Yes," said David without the slightest hesitation.

Again there was a silence. Then:

"You don't ask questions."

"I have none to ask," said the young man. "Five pounds a week is five pounds a week."

"You don't ask where Sommerford Keynes is."

"No," ejaculated David. "I know."

"When were you there last?" asked the man behind the curtain.

"About six years ago. I took a canoe upriver to the source, or as near it as I could get."

This answer was apparently satisfactory.

"Now there is one more thing," the man went on in a less impersonal manner. "There may be a certain degree of personal danger in connection with your duties at Sommerford Keynes. There are people who would hinder the progress of Professor Massaroon's work if they could. It will be part of your business to see that he is well guarded and that unauthorized people do not come near the laboratory, which is isolated in order that that risk may be to some extent obviated. That is all. You will be given a letter as you leave this flat in which your instructions are set down. Memorize them carefully and destroy them at once. It is imperative that the professor's work should not be suspected by certain people. It is valuable work, extremely valuable. Do not forget that. Your position is one of trust—and in case you feel disposed to question us, remember that we are not questioning you. Also you will be under a surveillance which will not permit monkey-tricks. That will be all."

David rose to his feet and in a dazed frame of mind followed Mr. Blenkiron into the corridor, where the elderly and prosaic butler, spoiling the illusion of respectability he presented, handed the bewildered young man a square, sealed envelope, ushered them into the lift and pressed a button. They descended forthwith to the ground level with the ordinary world.

David reached the pavement and stared back at the door, feeling that he had not possessed tangible evidence of the occurences of the last few minutes, he would have frankly disbelieved them. He turned the letter in his hands. Mr. Blenkiron broke in upon his meditations.

"Well, that's done with."

"Or just begun."

"True. Perhaps that is more exact. Now I must bid you good night. We shall meet again. Quite soon perhaps. Don't forget what he said about that letter. Destroy it as soon as you've read it. So long."

He began walking away in the direction of Northumberland Avenue. David looked after him for a moment and then ran after him and caught him by the arm.

"What does it all mean? What do you know about that chap behind the curtain—and this Professor Massaroon and his laboratory. His being in danger, and my—"

Mr. Blenkiron interrupted him.

"No more and no less than you do; except that I read my instructions this morning. One of 'em was that I must never be seen with another member of the staff. Au revoir."

THIS time David made no attempt to follow him. Instead he approached the nearest street-lamp and tore open the letter, eager to clear up the mystery. But when he found the typewritten page he lost all interest in it in the light of a brand-new crinkly, all-powerful ten-pound note which was tucked away within its folds. He stuffed the letter unread into his pocket and stood for a moment, stroking the note as it lay in the palm of his hand and gazing upward at the stars.

"Food!" he said aloud. "Lashings and lashings of food!"

And, then, like one inspired, he set off in a shaky run in the direction of the more brightly illuminated street, the bank-note grasped in his clenched fist. It says much for him that even in the ecstasy of anticipation he realized he could not, dressed as he was, venture into the Carlton or the Piccadilly; it was a case for Genaro's in Little Compton Street, where great stacks of ready-to-eat edibles could be consumed in modest surroundings. But all thought, speculative and otherwise, was lost in the dream of hunger satisfied.

On his way to that feast he passed under many succulent electric signs, but he did not see any of them.

II

NOBODY, unless he has starved, can be expected to realize the full extent of David's appreciation of food on that historic night at Genaro's. The flavor of each successive mouthful smote, in the physical meaning of the word, upon a palate that had lain dormant so long that, when awakening, it became at once the center of his being. It absorbed the senses of sight and hearing until he entered into a realization of taste which rendered him oblivious of his surroundings.

David lay back in his chair at last and threw his serviette on the table with the gesture of a man who has dined well and is not ashamed of the fact. He drew at the cigar, rolling the smoke between his lips in thick, heavy coils of fragrance, and began to blow rings with the fastidious care of an expert.

As the fifth and most perfect dissolved into shreds of blue vapor to join the little cloud which hung above his table, he remembered all the things that had combined to make possible the final joy in which he was wallowing, that of serene contemplation.

He took the letter of instructions from his pocket and with the deliberation of one whom the unpleasant things in life can no longer affect, spread it flat on the table and began to read. There was no preamble to the typescript save the date, July 7th, which was written in ink in neat, concise caligraphy.

> You will provide yourself tomorrow morning with the following articles:
>
> (1) The Oarsman's & Angler's map of the River Thames, published by Edward Stanton Ltd., 12-13 Long Acre, W. C. 2.
> (2) Three suits of chemists' overalls.
> (3) A pair of smoked spectacles.
> (4) Two pairs of rubber-soled shoes.
> (5) A protective weapon.
>
> On completing these purchases you will catch the 12:45 P.M. train to Cirencester and on arrival there make your way by road to the field on the north side of Kemble Mill, which is marked on the map above the word Thames in the extreme top left-hand corner. Here you will be met and conducted to your destination (already mentioned verbally). You will know the guide by the passwords "Five miles from the source."
>
> A sum of ten pounds is enclosed herewith for immediate expenses.
>
> The importance of destroying this letter has already been impressed upon you. Do so at once.

The young man read this amazing epistle twice before he realized how fully it bore out the characteristics of his visit to the flat off Northumberland Avenue. He blinked once or twice in spite of himself. He had never told himself that his more recent adventures were of a prosaic kind, for a man is not often in the position of a wanted murderer, but the atmosphere which radiated from the letter before him was enough to tax his credulity.

Yet there it was, written in the clearest language with a clean typewriter, and furthermore it came as a logical enough climax to the incident of Mr. Blenkiron and his haddock and the subsequent interview with the individual who, for reasons of his own, engaged his employees from behind a curtain in an expensive flat off Northumberland Avenue.

It was all undeniably ridiculous but quite as undeniably true. As true as the ten-pound note, which had already done more for him than do most ten-pound notes for most people. He realized the important part it had played in his life, and dwelling on this aspect of the affair, his tendency was to credit with more readiness every thing that had to do with it.

He called for his bill, and while it was being prepared reread the letter several times until its details were clear in his mind. Then, as his first act of obedience, he tore it up into minute pieces and piled them in an ash-tray.

DAVID turned south down Charing Cross Road with the thought that Genaro's had provided him not only with a dinner but also with the happiest of memories. He would certainly go there again.

His mind was full of tumultuous emotions over which the well-fed sensation presided like an amiable fairy, quieting, soothing and cheering, instilling the spirit of optimism in place of the specter of pessimism, which of late had become such an established tenant. Among the emotions, however, was one which raised an ever protesting voice against the principle of peace, and this was apprehension, concerning a matter which might well destroy this new-found security—the matter of the death of Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer.

Still to worry would do no good, and he passed down Trafalgar Square and down Northumberland Avenue without being aware of the journey on which his instinctive feet were taking him. He came out of his reverie to find the river before him, dark below the darkness of the embankment.

His first instinct was to recoil and retrace his steps from a vicinity so alive with evil memories, but then he saw that those very memories no longer had any power on him. Genaro's had given of its best and thus armed him with invincible weapons; he smiled to himself and made for the seat he had learned to regard as home.

He sat on it and considered the wide range of choice he had in the matter of finding a bed for the night. He looked round at the towering magnificence of the Savoy with the eyes of one for whom it held no terror; unless it was that of discovering its joys too easy to love. For on the morrow he would have to do the shopping prescribed on the letter in time to catch the 12:45 P.M. train to Cirencester.

AT THIS point he became aware of a slight figure some five yards away from him. A second glance told him that it was a woman. She was leaning against the stone parapet with her back to him, apparently in deep contemplation of the slow moving water. Her clothes were dark and indefinable, and she wore a small tam-o'-shanter pulled down over one ear. David could not be certain but from the movement of her back she might be clasping and unclasping her hands.

Suddenly he lifted his head. The girl was scrambling from the pavement to the parapet. He did not require any effort of intuition or imagination to know what she was about to do. He jumped to his feet and leaped across the few intervening yards and had his arms around her even as she reached a standing position on the parapet. He dragged her from the dangerous coping and away from its tempting vicinity with considerable difficulty, for after crying out indignantly she set about kicking his shins and twisting with some vigor in his confining grip. She was small, but she was uncommonly determined.

"I thought you were asleep," she said between her teeth. "Let me go."

"Be still, you little fool!" he cried.

She did not take his advice. Instead, she wriggled an arm free and hit him squarely in the face.

"Leave me alone. Why can't you mind your own business?" she cried hysterically and hit him again. David regained the free arm and lugged her in the direction of the seat. And then he heard a loud voice.

"Hey!" it said. "What's the game?"

DAVID desisted from his efforts toward the seat, but, still retaining his hold on the girl, regarded a large policeman with horrified eyes. His wits worked, however, with commendable swiftness.

"It's all right, constable. A bit of a—a tiff." He brought out the word with difficulty, for he did not like it. "A matter of a kiss," he added by way of inspiration.

"Ho!" said the policeman, and then again, "Ho!"

His suspicion was obvious and well-grounded.

"Is that right, Miss?" he inquired and came closer to them.

The girl seemed to shrink in David's arms.

"Yes," she said after a considerable interval.

The policeman, perhaps gratified by her noticeable awe of him, laughed heavily.

"That's all right then. But you mustn't make a scene in a public thoroughfare. 'Gainst the law. Causin' a disturbance. Causin' a crowd to collect."

There was no crowd as yet; unless he constituted one, but again with commendable readiness of wit, David slipped half a crown into the man's hand and returned his arm to its original mission of saving a would-be suicide. The policeman slapped his belt and wandered off into the night.

David looked at the girl and the girl looked at him, and then she moved in his hold.

"All right. I promise not to—yet."

"Nor ever," corrected David and guided her by the arm to the seat.

He sat by her side and regarded her invisible face with concern. He knew what reaction felt like. But he was not wise in the ways of women, was not prepared for the form in which she expressed it. With appalling suddenness she flung herself forward, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed with such an utter abandon of misery that David, not unused to the griefs and tragedies of existence, found himself helpless and at a loss before such a phenomenon. He did the only sensible thing he could have done. He bent and gathered her up once more in his arms and took her on his knee so that she could have out her cry in comfort.

WHEN the sobs had died away into small breathless quiverings of her entire body, he said gently:

"Now you must tell me all about it."

At the time it struck him as a fatuous unnecessary paternal attitude to take but the girl in her extremity must have needed something of the kind. At all events she sat up and regarded him.

"I can't see your face," she said, "I can't see whether you are nice or not. Anyhow, I hate you! I hate you!" she said furiously. "I know I shall never work up the courage to face that river again. Ugh! It was black! But it was the only thing for me! Blackness! Like the despair and horror and fear that have followed me all the time! Oh, how I hate you!"

For all that she was sitting on his knee she spoke with an intensity of feeling that shocked him. He had never before been told he was hated. The idea was novel but unpleasant.

"Look here," he said. "I did what anybody else would have done. You weren't responsible. It was my duty as a—a man and a citizen to haul you off that parapet. Try and see it like that."

She laughed a short, hard laugh.

"A man and a citizen. I hate men and I hate the word 'citizen.' You and your citizens. You comfortable, ordinary, sinless, full-bellied citizens! I hate you! What would you feel like if you weren't a 'citizen'? If you were an outcast—a fugitive, a loathsome thing in the eyes of smug, complacent law-abiding 'citizens'?"

David, by reason of the last seven days, could understand something of her point of view.

"You, then, are not a 'citizen'?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I am a shorthand-typist."

He was expecting a confession of some carnal sin; of some social misdemeanor that had found another careless devotee whose moral sense had found her out. He was prepared for a man's name and a story as old as the hills. His surprise, then, was not assumed.

He stared at her and listened to the flood of pent-up words that his ready sympathy had let loose.

"Have you ever gone hungry I wonder?" she began, but it was the rhetorical question. At the moment she did not care whether he had known hunger or not. "I have gone hungry, when I was quite a little girl. My father was a colonel—oh! but a very old colonel—in an Irish regiment. He never had any money—never! We lived in a broken-down, ancestral, highly respectable, leaky-roofed farmhouse in County Down.

"My mother died because she did not have enough to eat at a time when she was delicate. My father did not die because he kept himself alive on a funny, bony substance which he called 'pride'. I did not die because I had the devil in me. That's what my father called it, but he did not say I owed my life to it. He did not worry about his own, mine or anybody else's life particularly, because there was always the regiment. That was his life, and it was behind him. When I was fifteen I was a woman, almost an old woman, so much of my youth had been dedicated to the past. Then a new shop was opened in the village—and in a window was a brown velvet frock that was a frock out of a fairy-tale to me. It's price was five guineas, and about as far from my reach as the moon—until some mad fate brought it down within grasping distance. I found a pocket-book in the lane by the side of the house with six pound notes in it—nothing else. No letters, no cards—nothing. I held the pieces of paper in my hand—I can see the picture of the Houses of Parliament to this day—and thought of the frock in the window of the new shop.

"Of course I bought the frock. Who wouldn't who had been starved of pretty things at an age when clothes meant the world? I hid it in the bottom drawer of my ramshackle wardrobe, like a queen hiding her jewels. It was a glorious moment. That night I dressed myself up by my light of a candle and acted the 'grande dame' before the mirror; happy for the first time in my life. In the morning the world fell to pieces. The loss of the money, the buying of the dress were two common and inseparable items of knowledge. The pocket-book belonged to a magistrate who sat on the same bench with my father. By the afternoon I was homeless. My father had salved his pride—if he had not I suppose he would have died for lack of it.

"I was angry, oh, so angry, at the time. Of course I kept the frock. I'd suffered for it and I had earned it, according to my queer code. My father, even in his wild fury, had not sent me out penniless. He flung me a few pounds, all he had in the house, forbade me ever to use his name again, and was finished with me.

"I got a job in Belfast as a conductress on one of the municipal trams. I lost it because the superintendent tried to make love to me. So I learned to hate men. So I came to London and drifted from one job to another. That was a year ago. Then I met a man in the park—it sounds traditional doesn't it?—about six months ago. He was not a pretty sort of man to look at. He took me out to lunch, gave me a five-pound note and the address of a friend of his who wanted a secretary who could keep her mouth shut. He thought I'd do because I had no one to talk to. He was right, I suppose.

"I liked him at first because he did not behave as anything but a disinterested philanthropist. He gave me his address and told me to let him know if everything went all right. Well, it did. I got the job and practised like anything on a typewriter and went to Pitman's in the evenings. Four months' solid work gave me proficiency and I became a full-fledged secretary. I still am—since you won't let me finish myself. My friend did not lose sight of me. He sent me books and chocolates, took me to the theater occasionally. Then, one night, he asked me back to his flat after a show. I went—"

Her voice came to a sudden stop, as if she was reliving the incident.

"Yes?" said David gently.

She went on:

"He was like the superintendent of conductresses in Belfast, only a lot less good to look at. He frightened me—terribly. While we were talking I saw something in the drawer of the table in his study. I played with him, getting nearer to the table all the while. Then suddenly, when he put his arms round me I snatched the thing out of the drawer and flourished it. He drew back, calling me a 'hell-cat' and a 'spit-fire' and a lot of other pretty names that I can't repeat. I laughed at him and demanded that he let me out at once. He snarled so that his teeth showed. All yellow they were; I can see them still. Ugh! He wouldn't let me go he said. He'd be damned if he would. And so he was. For as he rushed at me I shot him quite dead."

"Good God,' 'said David and instinctively tightened his arm about her shoulders.

She nodded.

"Yes. That's how I felt—at first. I ran away of course, with the pistol still in my hand. I stopped running when I realized that it would look funny and hid the pistol in my hand-bag. It was such a big pistol, too! I couldn't get it in properly and I felt that everybody could see it sticking out, shrieking that it had just killed a man. Then I came to the river and threw the horrible thing into the water. The splash seemed to wake the dead—"

Again her voice trailed away, and David sat, staring in front of him, stupefied by the coincidence of her story with his own. Even to throwing the weapon into the river! It was incredible. He heard her voice as she continued, speaking slowly with unconscious tension.

"Ever since then I have been haunted by the fear of people looking at me; of policemen—I hate the sight of policemen.

"I didn't mean to kill him. The pistol went bang and he fell on the floor. But I did kill him and he did deserve it, to die. He was rotten. Rotten! He boasted to me. I know. He's dead, and I killed him. So you see how it is. You see why I hate you. You've brought me back to the fear. Now I suppose you will give me up to the police—unless you are merciful, and let me reach that parapet."

David shut his teeth.

"Never," he said. "I know what it is."

She tried to see his face again.

"You mean you know—what it is to be in a police-station? To be tried for your life? To attempt suicide?"

He shook his head somberly.

"No, but pretty nearly. I know what it feels like to have killed a man—or rather to be thought to have killed a man. To be running from policemen." Then to detract her attention from himself—the time was not ripe for his story—he asked her:

"This man—what was his name? The one you killed?"

There was no hesitation.

"A Mr. Reuben Lipsheimer," she said.

DAVID SHAW GOULD didn't cry out. He did not say anything at all. He merely wetted his dry lips with a drier tongue. And her head drooped suddenly on his shoulder, and her eyes closed.

David listened to the gurgle of the river and the gradual softening of the girl's breathing with his heart full of a boundless pity. That night he did not sleep under any hospitable roof or in any soft, luxurious bed. If he slept at all it was under the starless London sky on the bench by Waterloo Bridge with the girl's head resting on his shoulder. But for the most part he spent the night in a vain endeavor to unravel the tangled skein which was bound around the death of Reuben Lipsheimer. The skein which linked him to the girl whose name he did not know, whose face he had scarcely seen—but whose weary head was heavy upon his shoulder.

Toward morning an idea occurred to him, and he became conscious of a strange sense of relief. He was glad, for her sake, that he had saved her life, and he watched her still face with a gentle happiness. From that moment in the summer dawn, when he saw the delicate features for the first time, the world became a subtly different place.

He realized that he was no longer alone.

David watched the August dawn breaking behind the distant gray dome of St. Paul's with more interest than he had accorded any dawn he could remember. It was about six o'clock before the full rays of the sun, striking through the mists, came to the surface of the river and brought life to its slow movement. David smiled and stirred slightly so that the girl who rested against him stirred also, in her sleep. He smiled because for the first time in the last few hours—since he had met this girl—he saw himself from a detached point of view.

Tenderly he woke the girl. And he watched her carefully, seeing her clearly for the first time, while she made an effort to recollect the events which had brought her to the place and company in which she was. She looked at him like a perplexed child for a moment, and then quivered under the shock of complete remembrance. A stifled exclamation of nervousness and returning fear forced itself from her lips.

"Look here," said David. "I'm not going into details now, but I can assure you that when you believe that you shot the unpleasant Mr. Lipsheimer you are making a horrible mistake. You didn't kill him any more than I did, although I was at his flat that night and have spent the time since in much the same way as you have—in avoiding policemen and trying to think of some escape from the inevitable moment when I shall be hauled before a magistrate and charged with a murder which I had every conceivable motive for committing. Neither of us killed him. Mind you, I could forgive anybody, morally, for committing murder, but from an economic point of view, I could not. Economically murder doesn't pay."

"You mean that somebody else killed him?" said the girl. "And *you* were in the flat? How extraordinary! I wish I could believe it—God knows I do." She twisted her hands while David resumed.

"He is dead. I didn't kill him and you didn't kill him. Therefore, somebody else is responsible for his death. As to your believing in your own innocence it is quite simple."

"But how can it be simple? I saw his face; I raised the pistol and fired at him. Of course I killed him. You're only trying to make me stop worrying. You're afraid I shall—try the river again, when you're not there to prevent me. But you needn't worry. I promised not to. I hadn't slept for two days, and now I feel better. You have given me a night's sleep—it is the greatest thing you could have done. You've saved my reason; and in a way I'm grateful. It is better to face the thing out and I suppose to—to—even to be hung for killing a man like Lipsheimer is not a bad death."

SHE stared across the river, and David observed the roseate light of the early sunshine on her cheeks. It struck him with a sudden sense of shock that she was beautiful. Then he brought out the trump card for the playing of which he had worked so carefully. She was alive now, to understand.

"Last night," he said, gripping her arm firmly, the better to emphasize what he was about to say, "you said that when you ran from the flat you stuffed the pistol into your hand-bag and were afraid that everybody would see it *because it was so big*. Isn't that so?"

She nodded, regarding him closely.

"Well, there was one point about the murder that you may not have learned. Reuben Lipsheimer was killed by a bullet from a .25 automatic."

"Yes, I read that."

"And you didn't realize that a .25 automatic is one of the smallest pistols made? You could put two of the conventional pattern into an average-sized hand-bag without bulging it at all—or at least, very little."

"Then the pistol I—"

"Exactly. It was probably a .32 or even a .45—a much heavier caliber. But there is still another thing. Can you describe the pistol?"

She wrinkled her forehead.

"It was made of shiny metal, and had a short, stumpy barrel, isn't that what you call it? The handle part—where you hold it—was black wood, and there was a kind of circular thing with holes in it just behind the barrel."

David laughed.

"As I guessed. It was a revolver you had, not an automatic, and the police are certain it was an automatic that killed Lipsheimer. The bullet is different from a revolver bullet. Besides, now that I come to think of it, they found a larger caliber bullet in the panel of the door. Was the door directly behind Lipsheimer when you fired?"

The girl thought for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "It was. I remember the way his head was silhouetted against the dark wood. The walls of the room were cream-colored."

David spread his hands with the gesture of a conjuror who has successfully produced a rabbit from a hat.

"What more do you want? When you fired Lipsheimer must have dodged and then stumbled either intentionally or by accident. You ran away at once believing him dead, a fact which the morning papers confirmed. Besides, at what time did you leave?"

"About midnight."

"Exactly. I must have arrived shortly afterward, and he was as much alive then as at two o'clock that morning, for I left him then. Whoever shot him, shot him when I had gone."

The girl sat very still for an appreciable period of time, assimilating these new facts and readjusting her preconceived ideas. When at last she turned to him it was with a light in her eyes that had not been there before.

"I believe it! I believe it! O God, what a relief."

Then she hid her face suddenly in her hands. He put his arm about her shoulders and said gently:

"It's all over now. You see what I

mean? There's no earthly reason for you to worry. Let's wander along and find some breakfast. I expect you're famished and I know I am. Come along!"

With an effort she pulled herself together, and obediently rose. Side by side they walked into Northumberland Avenue where David found a taxi. He roused the somlent driver and bade him take them to the Criterion brassière, where he knew it was open all night.

IN THE restaurant David examined the menu with interest.

"Bacon and eggs?" he inquired, and the girl nodded.

"Good. The Englishman's staple food. And coffee and hot toast, I believe."

The waiter departed and the two looked at one another with a sudden shyness in their bearing.

"We've got to stick together, you know," David said awkwardly. "After all, we're in the same boat."

She nodded.

"But I'm going away today."

David gazed at her in consternation.

"Going away? Isn't it rather sudden? Last night—" The girl smiled.

"I know. But today things are very different—thanks to you—my friend. I have something to live for, in a way. I have my job, and my employer had arranged a—a journey. I will go with him, of course. He's a very busy man."

Here the waiter brought the bacon and eggs, and while he served them David contemplated the fact of his own job, his own journey, which in the strangeness of his later experience had lost its significance in his scheme of life. Now he remembered and the thought became a sudden trap. He, too, was going away.

"But you must give me your address," he said. "We can at least write to one another. If you, that is—wish to."

She broke a piece of toast, and shook her head thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid I can't give you my address."

He stared at her in bewilderment, and she hastened to reassure him.

"Oh, it's not that I—I don't want to keep in touch with you, but honestly it's only that my employer made me promise, when I became his secretary, that if ever he imposed secrecy I must respect his wish. Yesterday he told me that this mission on which we go must be kept absolutely secret. You see how it is?" She looked at him with pleading in her eyes; a pleading for understanding. Then she added:

"But if you tell me where I can find you, I'll write to you when I'm coming back, and you can see me."

David thought swiftly. Today he was to go to Sommerford Keynes, to the Mill House and the scientist, but he would be able to get away occasionally.

"Send letters to me Post Restante at the Fleet Street P. O.; I will be able to call or send for them. And for that matter couldn't I send mine to you in the same way?"

She thought for a moment, then agreed.

"Then here, this is my name," he said, and tearing the menu in half wrote "David Shaw Gould," on it and gave it to her. She looked at it, and then at him.

"I like 'David,'" she said. "Mine is Ann; Ann Brunton."

"Ann Brunton," he said, and pronounced it slowly.

Then she was gone, leaving him standing by the table staring at the revolving door. It was the last he saw of her; an oddly symbolic message in that the door came slowly to a standstill, motionless.

HE PAID his bill and went out into Piccadilly, where the Winged Eros presided over the deserted circus, like a graceful, elusive wraith in the sunlight. The world seemed suddenly empty, and he walked slowly to the beginning of Shaftesbury Avenue like a man who has lost something of which the value had still to be realized. He was too close to the experiences of the last few hours rightly to understand their significance.

He waited for a 'bus that would take him to High Holborn, and Gamages', where he had decided to purchase the articles mentioned in his unknown chief's letter of instructions. The 'bus came and he went on top, still occupied with his thoughts.

At Gamages', which was just opening, he went methodically from department to department buying all the things he deemed necessary for the new life.

David was still low in his mind when he arrived at Paddington and bought a ticket to Cirencester. He wore an expression of extreme gloom as he searched for and found a compartment in the train which was waiting, and would wait yet another twenty-five minutes, for its departure hour. He scowled, chin cupped in hand, at the thronging platform, and wondered to what life and to what fortune he was going. Yet behind these speculations still ran the thought of Ann Brunton and how poorly made were his arrangements to keep in touch with her.

He could not rid himself of the conviction that, after a fashion, she belonged to him by right of rescue, by right of what he had done for her physically, mentally and morally.

AT THIS point in his reflection he was conscious of a sharp, echoing explosion somewhere close at hand, which was followed immediately by a cry and the sound of many voices raised in excitement and alarm. Instinctively he stood up and leaned out of the open window.

No. 6 platform, at which the train was standing, was in a whirl of movement far more swift than was warranted by the mere catching of a train. This movement had at its center the figure of a man, who sat on the ground with one leg doubled up underneath him so that he might the more easily nurse the knee of the other leg. A straw hat of inartistic line was pushed back of his head and his mouth, situated just below the middle of an astonishingly red face, was working quickly and ceaselessly. He appeared to be swearing.

On all sides men were running hither and thither while a crowd of station officials gathered about the man with the red face. David saw him lifted up and hurried through a waiting-room door by three or four porters with a crowd of interested spectators at their heels. In the meantime a certain number of people continued to run up and down, and it was apparent that they searched for something.

David was not a little perplexed. He connected the sharp explosion with the general air of commotion, but he was at a loss to explain how. He therefore hailed a porter who was regarding the scene with greater calm than his colleagues and asked him what it all meant. The porter, who was a young man with a ready smile, turned.

"Did yer see 'is face?" he said. "He was that hangry! Some bloke shot 'im, and they're lookin' for 'im now. *They* won't catch 'im, nobody saw where the bullet come from. Caught 'im in the knee it did. Neat I calls it. 'E went down like a drunk when the lamp-post wobbles. Nasty lookin' fellah. Done some chap a bad turn, I dessay, an' now 'e's copped it."

The porter's interest wandered to the arrival of three policemen, who disappeared one after another into the waiting-room, which they commenced to empty of the onlookers who were in it. The search for the man who had fired the shot seemed to have lost its intensity, and it seemed that the porter's judgment was right. In all probability the man was half a mile away by now.

Suddenly David was aware of a movement behind him and he swung round quickly. The opposite door, which looked out onto an empty train standing in platform 7, was opening. The next moment a burly man clambered up the footboard and hoisted himself by the hand-rail into the compartment. He flopped down in the far corner and wiped his face with a silk handkerchief.

It was Mr. Blenkiron.

"Well, I'm damned," said David, and stared at his friend of the previous night.

"Well you needn't be so loud in voicing it," urged the other. "Do you think I make a habit of getting into trains from the wrong side?" And as if to emphasize his meaning Mr. Blenkiron shifted an automatic pistol from his right-hand coat pocket to his left.

"Good God!" said David.

"Don't bleat so," complained Mr. Blenkiron. "It's quite all right. I only smashed his knee. He was one of the—well, the others. I'll tell you more about it presently. It's sufficient that he was dangerous to me—and therefore to you. I saw you get into this compartment while I waited for *him* to come and wait for me, so I thought when my little business matter was over, that we might travel down together. Eh?"

"Charmed," murmured David. "Charmed, I'm sure." He sat down rather abruptly, wondering whether he would ever get used to the suddenness with which life was introducing him to the exciting things.

Mr. Blenkiron moved across to the window where David had been and examined the platform.

"Quiet enough," he said. "I hope they don't decide to hold up the train and search it. If I'd killed him, the brute—they would; that, as a matter of fact, is why I didn't. I hate trains that don't run to time. Where the devil's that girl got to? I sent her to buy some papers while I settled with Mr. Roberts. By the way," he added, turning his head, "I'd rather you didn't mention the matter to my secretary. I'm not sure, but I rather fancy she suffers from delicate susceptibilities. Some girls do—and she's been a little nervous of late. Ah! There you are—"

He opened the door and made way for a girl in brown, who entered the compartment carrying a small suitcase and a bundle of papers and magazines. At the sight of her face David sat bolt upright in his corner, while the whole world rocked about his ears. It was the girl with whom he had breakfasted, the girl whom he had feared never to see again, the girl whom— His jaw dropped and sunlight outside flickered in his eyes.

"Good God," he said for the second time that morning."

Mr. Blenkiron turned a mildly inquiring face toward him.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "You seem to be in an explosive mood this morning. Miss Brunton, may I present Mr. David? Mr. David, my invaluable secretary, Miss Brunton."

"How do you do, Mr. David?" said the girl demurely, and she held out her hand.

David took it. But for the veiled glimmer of warning in her brown eyes she might never have seen him before. Mystified and lost to the meaning of it all, but once again in control of his emotions, David smiled.

"I'm charmed to meet you," he said, as the train started.

Mr. Blenkiron beamed.

III

AMAZED as David Shaw Gould was, he played up. Here he was, on his way to take up the mysterious employment Blenkiron had found for him the night before, when he had been starving—and in growing fear of arrest for the murder of Reuben Lipsheimer. And Blenkiron himself had just entered the compartment from the wrong side!—cheerfully confessing that he had shot the man for whose assailant the platform, even now, was being searched.

More than that—he had brought with him, and introduced as his secretary, Ann Brunton, the girl David had stopped as she was about to throw herself in the Thames the night before. The girl who had slept all night in his arms, on a bench—the girl who had believed herself Lipsheimer's slayer.

If David was conscious of anything during the next few minutes, apart from his general state of wonderment and his eager pleasure at discovering that the girl was to be his companion in the new life, he realized that one principle must be obeyed before all others. He must let the other people do the talking until time and experience had shown him how matters stood. The girl had decided, and with commendable speed considering that her surprise must have been every whit as great as his own, that they must not acknowledge one another as acquaintances. This had been her first care, and David felt that she must have some good reason for such a policy. He was prepared, therefore, to follow her lead for a while, and turned his attention to Mr. Blenkiron, who was still beaming happily on them.

"I like to see young people get along well together," he said comfortably. "It makes me feel young myself."

David considered the other with observant eyes. In obvious directions Mr. Blenkiron was not the same person he had been the night before. He was far better dressed. Also, from the manner in which the girl had spoken of her employer, she had been his secretary for some while. The night before, however, Mr. Blenkiron had represented himself as down and out—very decidedly down and out when one remembered the haddock—and men who habitually take their dinners on to the embankment in newspaper parcels do not, as a rule, employ secretaries. These were things which required explanation.

Something of this mental questioning must have made itself apparent in David's eyes, for Mr. Blenkiron, smiling blandly so that his own eyes disappeared almost entirely behind their cushions of flesh, proceeded to reassure the young man.

"I'm afraid I rather misled you last night, David—" the use of his Christian name startled David for a moment until he remembered that to Mr. Blenkiron it was a surname. He recovered himself quickly and listened to the other's words. Mr. Blenkiron went blandly on:

"I know, however, that you will forgive

me for the slight deception when I assure you that the only way I could choose the man I wanted was by approaching him from the same social—or shall I say economic?—standpoint. That you were, in actual fact, somewhat above the sphere in which I found you, was pure chance. You see, it was absolutely necessary for me to find my man at once, for our plans matured a little sooner than we expected. When I allude to 'we,' I mean my partner and myself. My partner, who prefers to remain anonymous, was the gentleman whom you interviewed through the curtain. We had decided, you will understand, not to engage—an assistant, shall we say, unless both were in agreement about him. I was to find some one and he was to pass judgment on my choice. I am glad that my partner was so quick to see the advantages you offered—the state of mind with which you entered the matter, for instance. A state of mind, by the way, which I can readily understand—" with this last remark he shot a swift glance at the young man. David swallowed, and pretended that he did not understand, but for all that he was sure that Mr. Blenkiron had by some means learned about his connection with the Lipsheimer murder.

Mr. Blenkiron passed the point casually.

"As a matter of fact I am on your side," he said. "I know the truth." Then he became even more enigmatical. "I have some excellent evidence," he paused and continued: "However, you are to be trusted because we have more or less an economic hold on you—a moral hold, too, perhaps. In any case I am going to be quite frank in this matter, which I might not have been had matters been otherwise. Miss Brunton is not unacquainted with the business with which we—and you—are concerned. I will put it in a few words now, leaving Professor Massaroon to give you any details he may think necessary. Mr. David, we make, or hope to make in the near future, a very remarkable commodity. Namely, diamonds."

DAVID, who had met so many astonishing things during the last week, did not display the amazement Mr. Blenkiron had obviously hoped for by the manner in which he brought forth the announcement. He merely said:

"Yes?" by way of encouragement.

Mr. Blenkiron's blandness hardened for a moment.

"*Make*, I said, not *mine*," he snapped.

"Ah, make," David repeated. Then the matter assumed its fuller meaning. At last he knew for what adventure he had been recruited. He grasped the significance of the thing, and added: "Good Lord!"

"Exactly! The professor will make the diamonds and we will sell them, very, very judiciously in London, in Paris, in New York—all over the world, one by one, slipping them into the trade with the legitimate gems."

"But these imitations; won't they be detected by the experts?"

"Imitations, nothing!" returned the other, again ruffled. "The professor's stones are *real* stones. In a few hours he subjects carbon to the same process which nature takes a million years to complete. He is not the first man to do it, though; Moissan attempted it but got only minute crystals and at vast cost. Professor Massaroon has taken Moissan's formula and added a process of his own which enables him to make a crystal of any size he desires. He made one last week of sixty carats but the stone he got was badly flawed. Since then he has been rectifying the mistake which caused this, and by Thursday or Friday he will be ready to begin in earnest. We are to rally round him for the great day, and look after him."

"Look after him?" said David, and thought of the life preserver in his suitcase.

"Exactly; you and I. Unfortunately the professor was in touch with another syndicate before he came to us, and they pooh-poohed the whole thing. Now, however, they have discovered that he is at Sommerford Keynes, at work, and they suspect that they have let something good slip through their fingers. When the professor partially succeeded with his experiment last week it was discovered that he had been watched from the room above, through a hole in the ceiling. The spy could not be found. Probably he left at once in order to report to his chiefs in London and I gather that that report was the reason for the watchfulness of Mr. Roberts, who will not, I think, bother us for a while. But obviously there are more people concerned in our affairs besides him, and it is against them that we have to guard." Mr. Blenkiron paused and added with a sigh: "I am afraid they are an utterly unscrupulous lot."

His concern on this count seemed odd to David, who had witnessed an example of the moralist's methods with one of those same unscrupulous ones.

He glanced toward the girl and perceived that she was watching her employer with thoughtful eyes, and he realized that she had the same feelings about the man. She, too, was going softly. He gathered that she already knew the outline of the diamond-making scheme and was entering her subordinate share in it with both eyes wide open. Mr. Blenkiron had a hold on her similar to the one he had on him, or because the possibility of excitement intrigued her. This last he did not think could be the real reason unless she hoped to forget in it her own more pressing troubles. There was a great deal he wanted to discuss with her, and the desire to be isolated with her for a while so that they could decide on a mutual policy became suddenly important.

MR. BLENKIRON, after his last words, seemed to have fallen into deep and sorrowful contemplation of the wickedness of the world. And David saw his employer's eyes for the first time and from an angle which enabled him to see the light through them. They were of an uncanny paleness; so pale, indeed, that they seemed devoid of pigmentation. They were not even gray. The young man stared at them a little uncomfortably; they were very odd. Then he realized, with a sense of one making an unpleasant discovery, that Mr. Blenkiron had white eyes.

Quite suddenly David hated Mr. Blenkiron as one hates a loathsome reptile. The first thing David endeavored to do on finding that he was in the grip of this aversion was to banish it from the forefront of his mind. He drove it into the realms of his subconscious mind with all the concentration he could bring to the task.

The silence was broken by Ann Brunton, to David's relief: he had a great disinclination to speak.

"Mr. Blenkiron," the girl asked, "are we likely to have definite trouble with these people?"

The man looked up, and his eyes dropped back into their background of flesh.

"I can not say—yet. At all events I considered the state of affairs serious enough to go down to Sommerford Keynes myself. As you know, I decided that last night; when we got the professor's wire. It is simply a question of keeping our eyes open and dropping on anything or anybody that seems suspicious. But you are not to disturb yourself. Mr. David and I, with Van Loon, the diamond cutter who is with the professor now, will look out after that part of it. We shall have a lot of correspondence to do if the professor is successful."

David had been considering matters, and he now asked a question.

"What, as a matter of interest, is the legal aspect of this business?"

"Perfectly safe," said Mr. Blenkiron promptly. "I don't say that we could claim police protection, because that would mean giving our secret to the world—at least the secret of our activities. If a man can make diamonds he is entitled to do so. Our diamonds will be just as much diamonds as the 'cultured' pearls, made, with the oyster's help, by that enterprising Japanese syndicate, are pearls. Just as much. I quite appreciate your desire to be on the right side of the law."

This last was a second shaft, but it did not affect David as had the first. Although he hated and even feared Mr. Blenkiron, it was not with the hatred and fear of impotency. He felt that he could stamp on him without great effort if ever the need arose.

"Professor Massaroon will give you chemical details of his work, if he sees fit, but since we have still half an hour before we reach Cirencester I may as well tell you a little about diamonds," Blenkiron went on. "Diamonds belong to the regular system of crystals and are chiefly found in South Africa, the East Indies, and Brazil. The natural crystals, however, are more or less imperfect, and rough of surface, for which reasons they have to be cut in such a way that the light is most effectively refracted. A pure diamond is perfectly transparent and colorless, but many are tinted a variety of colors by traces of foreign substances. The most valuable, however, are colorless. Our work has been made possible by the discoveries of Lavoissier and Sir Humphrey Davy, who between them, at different times, proved conclusively that the diamond was formed from carbon—one of the primary elements—when the world was incandescent.

"So you see the only known method of obtaining them necessitates a certain state of our planet in its dim beginnings and a great deal of delving and scratching in the earth, or to be exact in the earliest formed plutonic rock, known as 'igneous' rock, which appears at or near the surface of the earth in what the geologists call 'igneous intrusions.' These 'intrusions' were forced up by the shrinking of the world in its cooling process, and the diamonds with them."

THE train had just stopped, and now the door of the compartment was wrenched open and a small man, heralded by what must have been the largest size suitcase, bundled himself in and after a cursory examination of his fellow passengers sat down in the fourth corner, immediately opposite David and diagonally opposite Mr. Blenkiron, and mopped his forehead with a yellow handkerchief. He was a shriveled individual about forty, with a bronzed, equatorial skin and bright eyes.

"A silly fool in the train before this told me that this beastly place was Cirencester," he said, jerking out the words. "It's dam' hot, today. Dam' hot."

David politely agreed with him and turned to Mr. Blenkiron, but to his astonishment that gentleman was lying back in his corner fast asleep, or pretending to be fast asleep, with a copy of the *The Morning Post* spread over his face completely concealing it. The discourse on diamonds had apparently come to an abrupt end. As the train started David caught a warning glance from the girl, in which she indicated that they must temper their conversation with discretion. She was more accustomed to the exigencies of Mr. Blenkiron's active life than he had had time to become. He watched her for a moment, and then her eyes signaled to him to come over and sit by her side. He allowed a slight interval and then changed his seat. For a while they sat side by side, looking out of the window. The little man, after regarding the sleeping man at the end of his own seat with a glance which conveyed nothing to the two opposite, turned to his contemplation of the scenery.

Then Ann spoke quietly to David under the roar of the train.

"Auntie doesn't know we've met before, you know," she said, which the young man at once understood. Mr. Blenkiron was out of earshot, and if the newcomer, who was nearer, heard it, it would mean nothing to him. David followed the lead given him.

"Yes. It's rather fun. We'll keep it secret, shall we?"

The girl nodded.

"It will make us—allies—" she said. "I expect they will be getting in the harvest. You haven't been down before, have you?"

"Never. You know the old place well, of course?"

"Only since Auntie took it over. I spent a week there in the spring with her when she was getting things in order. That's the river over there, isn't it?"

And thereafter, having told each other all they needed to know at the moment, they fell silent. The one thing they would both have liked to discuss, however, was Mr. Blenkiron and the manner in which his sudden sleepiness had coincided so exactly with the arrival of the shriveled stranger.

Nothing happened; no word was spoken and no move made in the few minutes which were necessary for the train to reach Cirencester. But their arrival was not without incident.

The train stopped, and Mr. Blenkiron, instead of getting out, continued to doze in his corner under *The Morning Post*, and David and the girl, since they were under his leadership, had no alternative but to wait for him to make some move, so they sat still. The little man, on the other hand, dragged his suitcase from the rack so that it descended like an avalanche on top of him, and struggled with it to the door, by which Mr. Blenkiron slept. Then, as all three thought they had seen the last of him, he contrived to knock the shielding pages of *The Morning Post* from Mr. Blenkiron's face, in a manner which could not have been accidental. As they slid to the sleeping man's knees the other said gayly:

"I thought it was you, Percy. Wake up, my boy, you get out here," and he forthwith opened the door.

And it was evident, both from his tone and his words, that he did not suppose Mr. Blenkiron to have been asleep for a moment. Having justified himself thus, he launched himself on to the platform, permitted a porter to relieve him of the burdening suitcase, and scuttled rather than walked from view.

Mr. Blenkiron's normally robust-colored face was a queer, grayish hue, as he stood up and told his two employees to hurry and get out before the train started.

It was not before the three of them were standing on the platform that he made any comment on the affair. Then he said, more to himself than to his companions:

"I thought the swine was dead!"

DAVID'S appetite after his several days' enforced fast had not been entirely dissipated by dinner at Genaro's and breakfast at the Criterion brasserie, and he was aware of no little response in his soul to Mr. Blenkiron's decision, proclaimed from the station steps, that he needed lunch.

"The Bull and Bush, I think," he said, and led the way across Cirencester's main street to that hotel.

It did not occur, however, to Mr. Blenkiron's employees, that the need for food was due to any physical emptiness. It seemed more likely that he was in reality searching for something with which to occupy his external senses while he grappled with the state of anxiety into which he had been thrown by the words and behavior of the shriveled stranger in the Cirencester train. He bustled up and down the hotel lounge with unaccustomed energy.

David did not require much intuition, even if he lacked the details, to realize that Mr. Blenkiron had had a very nasty shock indeed. The exact degree and nature of it, however, was hidden, while the fact that the bland one had been disillusioned on the score of the unknown's presumed death indicated nothing at all. "Swine was dead!" implied that disillusionment and also that he did not entertain any great affection for the little man.

While they waited for the recooked lunch at The Bull and Bush he talked ceaselessly about nothing in particular.

In the deserted sitting-room, after lunch when Blenkiron had disappeared, Ann and David moved close to one another as though prompted by some mutual instinct of their need for secrecy. It was their first opportunity since they had discovered one another to be conspirators in the same cause.

"Who was the man in the train?" David asked at once. "I would never have believed Blenkiron capable of such funk."

"It was *odd*," the girl agreed. "I've never seen or heard of him before, and I've never heard Mr. Blenkiron called Percy. He's very upset. It's the first time I've known him to be without—what shall I call it—his wits, perhaps. He is always so in command of things, himself particularly. You saw how certain he was about being able to make diamonds, for instance? Frankly, he has only a slender reason for such confidence. Professor Massaroon *may* be able to do it—that is how he puts it, and he is a sanguine old man."

David nodded.

"It certainly sounds a pretty wild scheme, doesn't it? I can't say that Blenkiron impressed me."

"The scheme is wild, but then the professor seems to have done some rather extraordinary things."

David spoke suddenly from his thoughts.

"Look here; why are you in this at all, anyway?"

She turned wondering eyes toward him.

"Why? I don't really know." She pondered for a moment, then added: "Perhaps because I like excitement; perhaps because Mr. Blenkiron pays me much more that I am really worth as a typist-secretary. And I need money. Eventually I want to have a home of my own somewhere."

"But the danger of this! Do you know Blenkiron actually shot a man on Paddington station before we left—while you were getting those papers? He suggested that I had better not tell you, but obviously you ought to know."

She nodded.

"I suspected it, as a matter of fact. I saw something of the disturbance from where I was and they told me a man had been shot and wounded in the leg, and I remembered that when we were in the taxi going to the station Mr. Blenkiron had kept looking out of the little window at the back and saying that we were being followed and that if 'they' were going to play any monkey tricks they'd have to get up early in the morning, if they wanted to play them first."

"You guessed, then, and didn't say anything?"

"What could I say? If my employer chooses to do that sort of thing, what has it got to do with me?"

"But you would have been implicated if he'd been caught—"

"Possibly. You forget what I told you

about my first experience? Of the frock and the lost money? And then Reuben Lipsheimer? My friend, I am more or less of an outcast—and I can't choose. Blenkiron knows about Reuben Lipsheimer. In fact it was his knowing that had as much to do with my wanting to do away with myself as anything else. The knowledge that some one *knew*—could possibly hang me—was what was so terrible. But when I said, at breakfast with you, that you had changed things for me, it was true. You gave me courage to see things through with Mr. Blenkiron. Before, I had hated and feared him. Now I only hate him."

THROUGHOUT this last speech David had been as one struck dumb. The thoughts, even to the facts, were so exactly his own. The girl was held by Blenkiron even as he was held. She hated him, as he hated him; as something loathsome and slimy.

"My God!" he cried with a sudden release from surprise. "He has us both in the same way!"

She smiled at him gravely.

"I know—at least I guessed from what he said to you in the train about being on the right side of the law—that he knew something about you. He used almost the same words to me a little while ago."

"But how in heaven's name *does* he know?" demanded David, and he strode to the window and stared at the ungainly figure of Mr. Blenkiron, who was walking slowly up and down the lawn with bent head and Napoleonic fold of arm.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"Nobody will ever learn what that man knows and does not know. But you must remember he was a friend, or at least an acquaintance, of Lipsheimer. You remember my telling you that Lipsheimer sent me to a man when I was looking for a job? That man was Mr. Blenkiron."

David swung round.

"Jove! I'd forgotten. Yes. I see now," he said, and a sudden, tremendous thought came to him. "Perhaps Blenkiron killed Lipsheimer! Perhaps he was in that flat all the time while you were there, and later when I was!"

She shook her head.

"I was with him the next morning when he opened the paper. He did not behave like a guilty man. I was watching with all my eyes. Believing that I had done it, I wanted to see what Mr. Blenkiron would say. It was no acting on his part—the first few minutes. He stamped up and down with rage at something—not sorrow or pity or anything; just rage, as though it upset some plan of his. He had got over it, though, by the evening. No. I'm as sure that he had nothing to do with it as ever I was sure of anything. Of course, at the time I was not looking for guilt; but the scene is so clear to me still that I can't be making a mistake."

"It put him in a rage, did it?" said David, thoughtfully. "It sounds odd."

"It looked odd, too. But then he's an odd man."

This brought David back to his original train of thought, and he broke out, using the girl's Christian name for the first time and unconsciously.

"But Ann, you are safe. He can't touch you—give you away—now that I can prove Lipsheimer was alive after you left the flat. You can get out of this ugly business now, before you're any deeper in it. Go back to London. Tell Blenkiron what you like—that he can do what he damn well pleases, but you won't go an inch nearer the Mill House, or whatever the place is called. I'll back you up."

He had turned to the girl, and, in his excitement, seized her by the shoulders. She looked up at him now, with the same grave smile, and shook her head slowly.

"But why not?" he urged.

"Don't you see, you dear knight-errant, don't you see that you couldn't prove I was innocent if he were to give me away?"

"I can. I—"

"Oh yes, you *can* in the sense that it is possible. But you can't because I wouldn't let you. You would implicate yourself. Virtually you would be getting yourself hung in order to save *me*."

"Not necessarily," he said, although he realized that she was probably right. "Besides, how do we know that Blenkiron would make a move? He may be bluffing. We can't tell."

"I know we can't. Oh, you persistent person! You *will* have it, I suppose. Listen, then. I can't back out because you're still in."

He did not understand for a moment, and she explained patiently, as to a child.

"A little while ago, although it seems like a hundred years, you were beseeching Fate not to let us lose sight of one another. You had just pulled me out of the nastiest hole a human soul could have got into and you wanted to see that your work was permanent, and I, who had to take up life where I had almost dropped it, had to go out of your knowledge; with Mr. Blenkiron, in fact, on this affair. But at the time I was filled with a feeling that I was doing something foolish, awfully foolish, in going away like that, without a word; but you see I wanted to vindicate my position, my moral position, with that man out there." She turned slightly toward the window, and then looked stedfastly into David's eyes. "But you; you are more or less in his power still; you've still to reach a point where you can snap your fingers in his face. Do you think I could let you carry on alone, after what you've done for me? Why, I know our Mr. Blenkiron backward! I've studied him for months, while you have only just met him. With my knowledge I think I can help you, so I am going to stay. Besides, who knows but this thing might turn out well for me? I am not being unselfish."

"You are," said David with conviction, while he strove to understand the awe and amazement with which he was filled. She would face danger, risking possible injury and even death—for who knew into what the thing might develop—in order to be of possible help to him. It was stupefying, not only because of its unexpectedness, but also because of its queer falsity of basis. He was not in Blenkiron's power to the extent to which she seemed to have been, and to which she now believed him to be. The thing was fantastic and in its effect on him more stirring that any emotion he had known.

Suddenly, looking down into her candid brown eyes, he discovered that he wanted to make some move, do something, or perhaps say something, but which, whatever it was, eluded his understanding. He chased the fugitive thought across the field of his consciousness and could not catch up with it sufficiently closely to recognize it. He dropped his hands from her shoulders but continued to look at her with a perplexed frown wrinkling his brow and nose.

Then, in the midst of his efforts, Mr. Blenkiron suddenly appeared in the doorway and stood staring at them with a peculiar expression on his face. It was as though he was seeing something of an unexpected nature for the first time. He was like a man who is suddenly faced with the fact that an object he has known for a long time has suddenly acquired a value or an aspect hitherto unsuspected. He looked both resentful and interested.

After a moment's contemplation he said bruskly:

"We'd better be getting on."

His voice broke the spell of silence, and, as is often the way, David caught up with the thought for which he searched—too late. He turned swiftly from the girl because he would have lost his head.

He wanted to kiss her!

David no longer wanted to help Ann; he wanted to love her, and, subsidiary to this, to be loved by her. And this salient fact was to change him decisively.

Queerly enough this change was marked in the sequence of events by a laugh. David laughed, suddenly, when he turned from the girl after his discovery that he had, without realizing it, been wanting to kiss her, and saw Mr. Blenkiron standing at the door of the hotel dining-room.

He laughed after an appreciable if timeless pause, but this in itself was not significant; the significance lay in the fact that he laughed at Mr. Blenkiron; at his face, at his pose and, more particularly, at his expression. In one moment the last vestige of fear he had had for the man disappeared, and a complete certainty of his own superiority took its place. He did not care what Mr. Blenkiron thought, said, looked, felt or did, realizing at the same time that the man he hated could and would in the immediate future try to order the circumstances which surrounded the girl he loved and himself. But ultimately it could not matter. He could not touch them.

Mr. Blenkiron, however, appeared not to notice this laugh, and if he did, he lost its significance. He merely looked hard at David, and said:

"Well; are you ready?"

"Quite," said the young man cheerfully.

TO BE CONTINUED

Reb Cantrell's Kid

By

Douglas H. Woodworth

In which a Coward Comes Through

THE supper hour was drawing to a close at the Empire, "Tucson's finest hotel" as a placard on the wall alleged, and the early diners were already drifting in by ones and twos from the noisy room beyond into the larger and more ornate barroom that reached across the entire front of the two-story building. There were many types of men represented in the growing stream that filed in from the dining-room; prosperous businessmen in dusty traveling suits of eastern cut; a few prospectors from the Castle Dome country; a lieutenant and a sergeant, down from Prescott; two or three hard riding cowboys from over on the San Pedro; several Mexicans, drooping cigarets in the corners of their mouths almost before they had left the dining-room; mule skinners; stage drivers; an assayer or two; and here and there, by far the most carefully dressed of all that company, silent sharp-eyed men with enigmatical faces, men who made their living by the turn of the cards.

The talk was as varied as the types of men represented. Near the end of the bar next the window two "Easterners" from St. Louis were discussing Grant's chances for re-election in the coming election, and bewailing the fact that Greeley had been chosen to lead the anti-administration forces. Leaning against the bar and toying absent-mindedly with his glass, a slender, quick-eyed man was talking glibly of "argentiferous galena" and "black sulphuret" to a prosperous looking man from Chicago. At an idle poker table a lean brown man was debating with a trooper whether General Howard would prove successful in persuading old Cochise and his band to return to the reservation, and from the velvet dusk outside the door came the mellow slurring speech of two vaqueros.

All in all, it was an interesting and a peaceful scene, decided the quiet little man who sat alone at a table at the end of the room farthest from the bar. This individual was not given to philosophizing or studying his fellowmen with an impersonal attitude; but in the forty odd years he had lived, stern experience had taught him the value of watching the trail ahead carefully.

Satisfied that all was well, the little man spied a crumpled newspaper on a bench in the corner and spread it out on the table before him. It was the Tucson *Citizen* and over a month old. His eyes wandered down the columns one by one, idly noting a phrase here and there. The territory, it seemed, now boasted a population of ten thousand and something, exclusive of Indians, with Tucson, the capital, claiming over a third of these. An official notice by Governor Safford; discussions of mineral finds; prospects of a railroad over the old Butterfield route; all these the little man read slowly, yet paying small attention to what he was reading. He came to an interesting paragraph under Local Matters, and smiled reminiscently as he read:

> "The eastern mail which should have arrived here last Monday afternoon, did not get in until Tuesday. The Apaches attacked it at Dragoon Pass and the driver went back fifteen miles to Sulphur Springs; and on the——"

THE semi-conscious feeling that some one was staring at him made the little man look up from his reading the while one hand slid smoothly from the table to his side.

"Heh-heh-heh!" The three sharp, explosive barks that passed for laughter with him cut through the noise of the room as he sprang forward with hand outstretched toward the old man who had approached quietly while he was reading.

"Why Reb Cantrell, yuh little polecat," cackled the stranger, pulling the small man to him and half crushing him with one long sinewy arm. "Durn yore hide, I s'posed the 'Paches had ye skeered outta th' territory years ago. Le's likker. I'm so dry I kin hardly talk."

The two moved arm in arm toward the bar, the while four poker players at a near-by table studied them carefully. The tall old man, Davie Hardy, was no stranger in Tucson. One of the few genuine old-time trappers still living, he had drifted into the southwest years before and settled down in Tucson to watch the world go by along the old stage trail when not acting as guide for troops from up Prescott way. Sartorial styles might come and go, but Davie Hardy refused to wear anything but the buckskin garments of his fast vanishing band. He was known to be a close friend of Captain Jeffords, the only man who could come and go safely in the haunts of old Cochise.

But when they heard the quiet little man with the odd laugh called Reb Cantrell their interest was aroused. Could that "half-pint hombre" be the Reb Cantrell known through a hundred tales from San Diego to Fort Smith; Reb Cantrell who had driven stage for the Butterfield line before the war, Apaches, and circumstances put it out of the running; Reb Cantrell who had gained his nickname, so report said, by stealing an army officer's horse in St. Louis and escaping southward to join Price after hostilities had started, only to desert when called a "promising boy" by old Price himself?

It was not until the couple had gained the bar, had had a drink of Taos straight and returned to their table with a bottle clasped under the arm of the old trapper that the four players were convinced that Reb Cantrell it was. It was not only the catlike grace of the little man as he walked, the two heavy Colts swinging in well worn holsters, the jaunty air, the constant glances that stabbed from side to side and took account of every one in the room that convinced them; it was those remarkable smoldering gray eyes of which they had heard, which when turned on them in a swift glance proclaimed the dangerous man behind. For in that casual glance those hardened men felt as if a wave of elemental force had smitten them; a force that asked no favors, overlooked no deals, but called all bluffs.

"The kind of eyes that Walker had," almost whispered a middle-aged man who had served with the famous filibuster in Nicaragua. "And, Gents, when The General turned them on yuh, yuh most generally started tuh move soon as he spoke."

THE two men, so widely different in size and general appearance, sat down at the end table again, Cantrell facing toward the bar with the street door on his left and the door leading to the dining-room on his right. The swinging lamps that had been lighted some time before shone down dimly on the well-filled room, while through the open windows facing the street came the gleam of lights in other establishments. The rumble of a freighter's wagon returning from Prescott, the thud of horses' feet in the dusty street, the tinkling of a softly strummed guitar somewhere in the darkness, the voices of two men raised in argument, all these varied sounds of the town outside came as a sort of echo to the scraping of booted feet, the clinking of glasses, and the minor noises of a faro layout as the evening got under way in the barroom of the Empire.

Davie Hardy leaned his wrinkled face over the table and talked in low tones with his companion. Cantrell, although far from a taciturn man when the occasion permitted, spoke seldom but observed much. Leaning back in his chair he was content to listen to the old trapper, and drink in the myriad welcome noises about him that sounded like music after a month spent beyond the iron hard granite peaks of the Dragoons in the Apache country.

He watched various individuals coming out of the dark into the lighted barroom, remain their chosen time and depart into the darkness again. Life, he mused, all this was life; a moment's groping in an uncertain light for a drink of whisky, a pouch of gold, or the hand of a friend, and then back into the darkness again.

His musing was cut short by a gigantic calico clad woman who strode in from the dining-room with a tin dipper in her hand. She went directly to the bar, towering above the men there and elbowing them aside calmly. Her high-pitched words cut through the hum of voices in the room so that Cantrell heard her distinctly.

"Shure an' it's yer pardin' I'm beggin' if ye got yer brogans in th' way av me feet," she called to a swarthy man limping away from her vicinity, "but mind ye, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Eddie, fill 'er half full of rale whisky, will ye? I'm mixin' av a toddy for Molly. She's that weak 'tis lucky she'll be if she lasts till th' mornin'. Thanks, me bye."

With that the woman retraced her steps, paying not the slightest attention to any one in the room.

"Who was she?" inquired Cantrell.

"Big Kate. She cooks here. Her man was a mule skinner 'til the 'Paches jumped him last summer. They cum here clear from Ioway, they say. An' lemme tell yuh, she's got th' biggest heart an' th' heaviest hand of anybody in th' territory, an' allus ready to use either. This Molly she's talkin' of, come here from 'Frisco a couple of years ago with her boy, a good sized lad, mebbe ten or so. Molly, she tried tuh git intuh one of th' dance halls down th' street, but no go, even here. Y'know, too old, an' not purty enough. She's been pickin' up a livin' doin' one thing an' another since then, Big Kate helpin' her. Th' kid is a sorta freak; nobody knows who his daddy was, maybe not even Molly.

"He's as quick as a side winder and ten times as treacherous, but 'fraid of his own shadder. Molly's been awful sick upstairs fer a long spell now, an' would prob'ly be dead now an' glad of it, if 'twasn't fer Big Kate. Th' kid has been doin' odd jobs around th' Empire here, but yuh don't see much of him. Th' boys like tuh pester him, yuh see, an' he won't come in here lessen he has tuh. If he does come in watch him, he's wuth it."

Davie took a plug from his pocket and shaved a little of the tobacco into his hand and filled his pipe.

"There he is now," he pointed out, leaning over to strike a match on his bootheel. "That little feller in th' jean pants."

Cantrell caught a glimpse of Molly's boy as the lad was making his way toward the crowded bar to deliver some message, dodging in and out among the elbows about his ears. He was a thin faced, dark eyed youngster with the air of a frightened rabbit. Glancing over his shoulder toward a teamster who had called out at him, he blundered against the arm of a tall man holding a glass of whisky in his hand.

Glass and drink tumbled to the floor and the tall man whirled with a curse, kicking savagely at the terrified urchin. Molly's boy was used to kicks and cuffs, and with uncanny speed avoided the boot. With a snarl the tall man drew a gun, and the boy, his face chalk white, came to a trembling halt at the other's command.

"Mister, I didn't go fer tuh do it; honest, mister," he whined, gazing at the big revolver like a fascinated bird.

"C'mere, yuh little imp," the tall man growled, "c'mere while I trim off yer ears and stuff 'em down yer throat. I'll lern yuh tuh bump intuh folks, I'll—"

The tall man's .45 spoke with a roar and Molly's boy, who had made a futile effort to dart into the crowd, leaped high into the air as the heavy slug tore into the floor by his bare foot. The crowd surged away from the two figures, so that the boy stood alone with his tormentor in the middle of a circle of amused faces.

OLD Davie Hardy was already on his feet trying to peer over the shoulders of those between him and the boy, but the small man, hopelessly at a disadvantage, climbed on the table and watched the little drama.

"Dance, durn yuh," he heard the tall man say as another bullet drove past the boy's foot. "I'll show yuh, yuh white-livered little pup. Dance, an'—"

"Heh-heh-heh!" Cantrell's strange, barking laugh halted the outburst instantly, and the tall man looked up to see where the applause was coming from before he turned back to his helpless victim.

"Heh-heh-heh!" That laugh was genuine enough, and yet somehow it sounded now as if charged with a biting derision. "Say feller, ain'tcha a bit skeered doin' that? Th' boy might have a jack-knife in his pocket an'—" Here the tall man swung about and Cantrell's voice became cold and contemptuous—"an' come up tuh yuh an' cut yore yellow heart out!"

Every one within hearing was now looking at the little man on the table. The nearest bartender was trying to wigwag some sort of warning message to him, and old Hardy was growling something into his ear, but he was oblivious to everything in the room just then except the tall man and the frightened boy standing in the clear space about them.

"Pardner," bowed the tall man, and his voice was venomous, "I would take it more'n kindly if yuh'd tell me jest what yuh mean by them words."

Davie Hardy knew the meaning of "them words"; knew too the tone in which his friend uttered them, and was trying to comment on the idiocy of bucking a play when the other man had a gun in his hand. Cantrell, standing lightly on the table, his arms folded carefully across his faded fancy silk shirt, smiled coldly as his gray eyes bored into the other.

"I mean," he said slowly and distinctly, "that nobody but a cross between a drunken 'Pache an' a white-livered polecat, sech as you be—"

The tall man's arm swept up, but the heavy crash of his big Colt was preceded a fraction of a second by the short bark of the derringer Reb Cantrell jerked from beneath his vest. The little man did not use his second shot; the .41 caliber ball had found its mark. The tall man took one uncertain step forward, striving with failing fingers to fire again, then with a little sigh crashed headlong to the floor.

There was no end of confusion in the room as Reb Cantrell dropped from the table to find Davie Hardy's arm about him and Davie Hardy's voice urging him away.

"This way, this way, Reb, yuh little fool; but I knowed yuh had somethin' up yore sleeve. No, no, *not* that way, here." And the man who had just shot it out with one of Tucson's most notorious bullies was lifted bodily in the old trapper's arms and dropped through a window in the end of the room. Hardy slid out after him, and the two men found themselves in a narrow space between the Empire and another building.

The old man led Cantrell down this dark cañon-like recess until they came to the rear end of the Empire where they sat down on a bench in the deep shadows. They sat for some time in silence, listening to the babel of voices coming from the front of the building. Then Hardy turned to his friend.

"Yuh shore booted th' lid off an' tipped th' crate over that time, durn yuh. That hombre yuh shot wasn't wuth hangin' as a man, but he's th' nephew of one of our soopreeme court jedges on th' one hand, an' on th' other, th' head of a drove of young hellions that ain't got nothin' tuh do but kill time fer th' bounty. Yes, an' they're dangerous too. Wouldn't put it past enny one of them tuh shoot yuh in th' back if they wanted tuh get yuh. See what yuh've done?"

Cantrell leaned over and laid a steady hand on the other's knee. His voice held a trace of surprise. "Davie Hardy, do yuh think a bunch o' polecats kin run a pair o' deuces past me?"

"I ain't blamin' yuh a mite, Reb, but yuh can't hold no more lead than another man, specially when yuh get it in th' back. Also, I was kinda thinkin' of th' kid. Them skunks will make life plumb hell fer him if nuthin' more'n tuh get yuh tuh make a crooked move when they'll be a-waitin'."

"Mebbe yo're right," said Cantrell quietly. "I'd never thought o' that. What d'yuh s'pose—"

BOTH froze into silence with the suddenness of men whose senses have been sharpened by years of life in a savage land. From somewhere within the room behind them came the sound of smothered sobs.

"I'll bet it's th' kid," whispered Hardy.

Cantrell sprang to his feet. "If they've done anything to that kid I'll hang their dirty hides on th' wall an' do it now," he said, and though his voice was level and controlled, it held again that cold menace the Empire's guest had noted a short time before.

Hardy found the rear door and pushed it

open. There was a rustle as some one fled, but Cantrell sprang after and caught the flying figure while the old man struck a light. It was Molly's boy; shivering and whimpering and trying to break away.

"There, there now, sonny," the tall trapper soothed. "We ain't aimin' tuh hurt yuh none. Good Lord, Reb, look at him!"

The lad's lips were swollen as from a heavy blow, one ear was bleeding, his face was covered with dirt, and his ragged shirt was half torn from his slender body.

"Talk quick," snapped Cantrell, his eyes like frozen flames.

"I got away that time when they was lookin' fer you, Mister, but maw was havin' a awful bad spell, an' Kate she sent me out tuh the bar tuh look fer Doc Masters, an' they caught me and I couldn't git away an' they cuffed me some, I guess. Anyway when I got back outta there, Kate she said maw was dead an' she went to find Doc herself, an' I—I'm skeered to go up where maw is alone." Again the slight frame was wracked by sobs, and Hardy cursed softly under his breath, but the little man did not hear; he was groping his way toward the dining-room.

Reb Cantrell halted by the door to the barroom, wondering at the hush that had fallen over the place. He could see Big Kate standing near the bar, her arms akimbo, her mighty bosom rising and falling with a scorn too deep for words. Her angry gaze was bent on a half dozen sheepish looking men near the bar; men who stood with lowered heads and thumbs hooked in belts or fumbled with the glasses on the bar.

"Mary Mither," she cried, finding her voice at last, "and is this the kind av scum as bates a poor lad whose mither's layin' dyin' above this very room. Oh, ye dirthy, dirthy—"

Reb Cantrell hated a scene like this; besides he had something to do and did not want to hesitate.

"Madam," he interrupted, stepping into the lighted barroom, a revolver in each hand, "Madam, I beg yore pardon, but would yuh mind steppin' aside a minute? I have somethin' tuh say tuh these here snakes myself."

For a tense split second it looked as though the deal would end in a blast of roaring guns, but the little man held the winning hand. There was something in his gray eyes that invited—nay, begged, implored—any one of the six to make a hostile move; a willingness to start action on the lone man's part that bred a corresponding reluctance on theirs. One man had died because of a laugh that night; why should any one else take a like chance?

The muzzles of Reb Cantrell's guns made a suggestive little upward jerk, and six pairs of arms reached for the ceiling. The others in the room made no move to interfere; perhaps they wanted to see the bullies given a taste of their own medicine; perhaps they too had felt the compelling power of the little man's eyes.

SIX weeks later in a hotel in St. Louis, John Reynolds, a Milwaukee business man, gave the following account of what transpired at the Empire this night, the while his hearers chuckled wonderingly at the strange ways of the southwest:

"By gorry, the little feller just walked up to those men and made them turn around facing the wall. Then he collected all their pistols and piled them on the bar. But he wasn't through—not by a jugful.

"He went down that line and as he come to each man he reached around and pulled the feller's hat down over his eyes, and there wasn't one of them that felt inclined to push it back. Then he told them to get out, and as each man felt his way to the doorway the little cuss just booted him as hard and as far as he could. All this time, mind you, he was lacing them with the worst and most insulting language I ever heard a man take.

"We heard a few muttered cuss words from out in the dark, but when the last man was gone, this here little feller he just faded away before we saw where he had gone to. Never saw anything so funny in my life, nor so serious, neither."

Before the last of his victims had picked himself up from the dusty street, Reb Cantrell was already groping his way through the unlighted dining-room toward the stairway down which he heard Hardy's voice soothing Molly's boy. Feeling his way up these he came to a narrow hall running the length of the building, and made his way to where an open door threw a band of yellow light across the hall.

Upon a cot in the corner of the room lay a golden-haired woman, her eyes closed in a sleep more peaceful than any she had ever known. Reb Cantrell gazed for a moment at those white pinched features—once beautiful, perhaps—at the slender neck and the wasted form beneath the bright Indian blanket; then his eyes swept down to the sobbing boy kneeling beside the bed, his face buried in his folded arms.

Big Kate was seated by the single window, rocking back and forth, and old Davie Hardy's tall form cast a grotesque shadow across the dingy wall. Cantrell stepped softly into the warm room and touched the boy on the shoulder.

"Listen to me, sonny," he said, slipping his arm about the frail shoulders, "Come with me and Davie a minute—I've got somethin' tuh tell yuh. Davie," turning to the tall trapper, "where can we go to have a little pow-wow?"

"I've got a little 'dobe out by the edge of town, le's go there."

MOLLY'S boy, looking up into the face of his new found friend, wiped his eyes on his ragged sleeve, slowly got to his feet and let the two men lead him away. As they made their way out the back door of the Empire and between shadowy buildings until they gained an unlighted street, dry sobs choked him again and again and he stumbled unseemingly.

"Maw's dead," he said over and over, as though trying to convince himself that the one person in all the world who had ever really loved him was gone forever, and now and then he turned his grimy white face to the sky, seeking, perhaps, a new angel among the brilliant Arizona stars.

And as they passed within a stone's throw of a dance hall from which came the stamping of feet and the roar of men in song, Molly's boy shivered and turning shook a small fist toward the sounds, meanwhile cursing so bitterly in his boyish voice that the two men, far from novices in a land where blasphemy was an art, almost felt themselves blushing as they heard the mere child beside them.

Davie Hardy led them to his little home, and, entering, closed the door and hung a blanket over the one window before lighting the candle on the home-made table. Molly's boy tumbled onto the bunk in the corner, while the two men rolled tiny Mexican cigarets, drew up chairs, and sat down to consider ways and means.

"This here is somethin' else agin, as old Jim Bridger would say," remarked Hardy after a silence. "Somethin's got to be done with that boy. If I knowed a family in this town that would take him, it would be different, but I don't. Kate can't do it; she's got enough to do cookin' there at the Empire, an' besides, he'll be pestered tuh death if he stays around th' hotel. What do yuh think, Reb?"

Cantrell looked over to the bunk where Molly's boy was already in a troubled sleep. "Davie," he said, "I've been thinkin' it over, an' I'm gonna take him and hightail outta here."

"You! What would yuh do with him?"

Cantrell ground his cigaret under his heel before answering.

"Davie," he said slowly, "I haven't been of much use to anybody in my life so far, an' they's quite a few counts agin me, an' as yuh know, I'm short in more than one town along the border. But if I've taken my share of dobie dollars from Mex smugglers, has it been more'n payin' them back for what old Padre Jarante did to brother Tom over twenty years ago down in Mexico?"

The old man nodded. But once before had he ever heard Cantrell speak of his past or the older brother tortured to death by the famous priest warrior. This silent little man was not given to talking of his deeds.

"If I leave that boy here, no tellin' what'll become of him, certainly nothin' good. But if I take him, an' he lives, I b'leeve I can make a man o' him. He's 'most skeered tuh death an' thinkin' of his maw, but he's quick as a cat an' looks like there was somethin' to him.

"Know what I'm gonna do with him? I'm gonna teach him everything I know about a six-gun from th' Road Agent Spin to th' Bradford draw, if it takes me ten hours a day for th' next ten years. He'll give me th' chance tuh test out an idee I've had for a long time—that yuh can drive fear outta a man an' put spunk in by makin' him th' confident master of th' six-gun. Now this here lad's afraid of his own shadder, an' consequently he's been picked on lots an's gettin' no better. When I'm through with him, what with his natural quickness tuh start on, I'll betcha he could beat the fastest man in the territory with a Colt."

Hardy shook his head. "I ain't so sure, Reb. Remember some men seem born tuh handle a six-gun while others are nootral because they know they'd be a mile behind th' last wagon in case of an argyment. Then, there's others that are quick enuff, but can't never seem tuh reach th' p'int where they're real ackrit. I guess yuh haf tuh be born tuh th' purple, as Preacher Adams would say. Look at you, Reb. Do yuh think th' average man could get tuh be as quick as you jest by practicin' all th' time?"

"I dunno," grinned Cantrell, "but I do know that I spend some time every single day with both my guns. Why when I got these new Colts a couple months ago an' laid aside th' old 'cap an' ball' ones, I'll bet I spent at least three hours a day on 'em."

"Where cud yuh take him?" inquired Hardy with a slight accent on the "yuh."

"That's easy," responded Cantrell. "Didja ever hear of Bruncknow's 'dobie house in th' foothills of th' Mule mountains, up the San Pedro? They's a half a dozen fellers I know there now, workin' in a mine—when anybody visits 'em—but," and here the younger man chuckled, "all they'll ever get outta that hole for their assessment work'll be mebbe a few lame backs. But they are a pretty good bunch of boys even if they do sometimes come ridin' in hell-for-leather with a pack of dobie dollars in their saddle bags. An' they know me, an' they'll be no monkeyin' around with this lad when I tell them tuh leave him be."

The old trapper nodded at mention of the Bruncknow house. "I was holed up thar fer three days onct when th' 'Paches jumped me in a dry wash an' I guess I'd a been there yet if it wasn't fer some hard lookin' customers come ridin' in an' th' Injuns faded. Tell yuh what, Reb, I'll help yuh tuh outfit that there boy an' git yuh started, but yuh'd better leave 'fore mornin' so's nobody'll know where yuh've gone. An' if yuh ever need anythin' send word by one of th' boys from th' San Pedro comin' this way, an' I'll see that yuh get it. What'll yuh need fust an' most?"

"Another pair o' these," said Cantrell tapping the butt of one of his new single-action Colt .45's, "an' a lot o' ammunition, an' some clothes an' boots fer th' kid. Can yuh get 'em yet t'night?"

For answer, Hardy got to his feet and reached for his hat, but snorted when Cantrell tossed a heavy money bag on the table.

"Think I aim to miss all th' fun o' this?" he demanded truculently, his gray mustaches bristling. "If I was thirty year younger yuh'd see me with yuh, but I'm no good when th' cold nights git my rumatiz goin'."

WHEN Hardy had gone, Cantrell went over to the bunk and shook the boy gently. The lad cursed wearily and opened his eyes, unable at first to place himself.

" 'Sall right, Pard. You an' me is goin' tuh take a little pasear down th' trail, an' I'm gonna give yuh a pair o' big guns like mine an' we'll shoot 'Paches an' have a hi-yu time. What say?"

The boy's eyes shone for a moment, then clouded. "Maw's dead," he stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "I shud orta be here t' help bury her, shouldn't I?"

"Uncle Davie will take care of all that," said Cantrell, studying his new protégé carefully, wondering what kind of a man Molly's boy would make after all. "We'll just hightail outta here, an' them fellers that was pesterin' yuh last night won't even know where you've gone."

"Damn 'em," the boy said bitterly. "I wish I cud kill 'em all. When do we go, an' who are you?"

"We're goin' just as soon as Uncle Davie comes back with some clothes an' grub fer us. An' he'll get us a pack mule. I got two horses here in town an' yuh can ride one of 'em—an' yuh can jest call me Dad if you want tuh."

"Can't Kate come too?"

Cantrell looked uncomfortable. "We-ll, not this time, I guess. She's gotta stay an' take care of th' Empire, yuh know."

Five hours later a wide eyed boy and a lean, gray eyed little man bade farewell to Davie Hardy and swung down the street and out on the old Butterfield trail heading southeast. The stars dimmed and winked out, and the bright sun, peeping over the crags of the Rincon mountains saw the little cavalcade filing its way through the dust that swirled around the giant cacti on the flats.

THE days passed swiftly at the Bruncknow house and Molly's boy developed rapidly under the protection and tutelage of Reb Cantrell. The hard eyed men who rode to and from the lonely adobe near the San Pedro might wonder to themselves at the meaning of the boy's presence, but no questions were ever asked, and but one lesson was ever needed to demonstrate the standing of "Cantrell's Kid," as he was called. That was when "Dog Face" Smith, drunk on mescal brought by Mexican smugglers, slapped the boy across the face when the latter accidentally spilled some hot coffee on the tipsy man's sleeve.

The boy snarled like a wounded cougar, but before the man could repeat the blow the cold voice of Reb Cantrell struck him like a whip lash.

"Dog Face," said the little man, his gray eyes boring into the fast sobering Smith, "you will get right down on yore knees and 'pologize to that kid an'—do it quick!"

The last three words crackled like pistol shots, and the bearded face of the offender was working with rage as he lurched to his feet. But Dog Face knew, as every man in that room knew, that he was to follow that sharp command literally and immediately or reach for his guns, and to do the latter meant almost certain death. It is one thing in the heat of battle for a man to go down firing as long as his numbing brain can command thumb to lift a hammer, but it is an entirely different matter to buck a stacked hand while alcohol fumes still cloud the brain and when Death holds the stakes. Dog Face was no coward—there was no room for a weak-kneed man in the Brunckow house in those days—but choking back a curse he dropped to his knees and mumbled he was sorry. Then without another word he walked out into the darkness and never returned.

In the silence that followed that little tableau, Reb Cantrell swept the room with his eyes of frozen flame. "I would take it kindly," he said in a level voice, "if you gents would all remember that when yuh hit that kid yuh hit me. Do I make my meanin' clear?"

NEARLY every morning through the three years that followed, the little man led the boy up into the foothills back of the adobe. Soon after they had disappeared, others about the Brunckow house could hear the sound of revolver shots, although no man knew just what went on up there as Reb Cantrell worked over his pupil.

The boy never carried his guns around the house, and buckled them on only when going out with his teacher. "For," Cantrell told him one day, "you can be nootral an' live more er less safe around these parts, 'ceptin' fer th' 'Paches; but when yuh pack a gun it's th' same as tellin' everybody that yo're ready tuh use it, an' if yuh ever reach fer a gun yuh've gotta go through with th' play an' no misdeals."

The little man took the boy's Colt and removed the triggers as he had with his own. By careful testing he eased the hammer pull until the revolvers were still sure fire but better adapted to the boy's strength. Then day after day he watched while the Kid drew and snapped, drew and snapped, with either hand, or with loaded guns whirled and fired at bits of rock Cantrell would send rolling down the slope behind him.

With a patience and cunning equal to that of the savages that sometimes watched them from some distant outcropping, Reb Cantrell strove through building up a mastery of the heavy Colts to implant in the boy's mind a self-confidence and daring entirely lacking on that first night they had met.

"The six-gun whittles any man down to yore size, Kid," he would say. "Don't forget that yo're as big as old Magnus Colorado when yuh've got them in yore hands." And then all unwittingly he paraphrased a medieval motto when he continued, "An' never pull 'em 'less yuh have a good reason, nor put 'em back 'less yuh've finished yore job."

ONE bright afternoon a few months later Davie Hardy came riding up from the banks of the San Pedro. Cantrell, recognizing the old trapper by his snowy hair, walked over to the rude corral to meet him.

"Hello, yuh little wildcat," greeted Hardy, sliding wearily off his horse. "My Gosh, I'm getting old. Thought I'd never git here. How's th' kid comin'? Durn my old bones. Gotta lot tuh tell yuh, Reb, an' it's important."

"Come up tuh th' house and git a bite an' we'll have a talk then. Th' kid's fine, and business is so-so."

The old man snorted a little at the word "business" as he stalked stiffly after his host into the cool adobe.

The Kid met them at the door and took Hardy's outstretched hand. He had seen the two men approaching and had proudly buckled on the two guns Cantrell had given him.

"Good Lord, how yuh've grown," chuckled Davie, sizing the fifteen-year-old youth up and down. "Reg'lar walkin' arsenal, ain't-cha?"

"Howarya Uncle Davie? How's Kate? Is them polecats still around town yet?"

To all of which questions and many others Davie Hardy made reply while Cantrell and the boy rustled some grub for him. There was no one else around the Bruncknow house that day, so the three had the old adobe to themselves. After the meal and while the boy was washing the few dishes, Hardy nodded to Cantrell and the two men went outside to sit on their heels in the shade of the house.

"Reb, have yuh had any visitors lately?" Hardy inquired after a pause.

"Once in a while a prospector or two, an' now an' then a bunch comes ridin' through chasin' some 'Pache horse stealers or some that ain't 'Paches. Why?"

"Dog Face Smith drifts intuh Tucson a month er so ago. Been over on th' Pecos with a cow outfit, I took it from what he said. Didja ever know Dog Face?"

"Sorta," Cantrell admitted. "He usta be here, but he walked out an' left us cold one evenin'.'

"Well, last night I heered this here Dog Face an' a U. S. marshal talkin' at th' Empire. Yore name was mentioned right frequent an' somethin' was said about a-er-r mail robbery over at El Paso a few year back. Th' marshal seemed interested when Dog Face said he cud lead him tuh where yuh hung out. That's my bag o' talk."

"Good fer old Dog Face," said Cantrell. "I didn't think he had it in him tuh call on me again. I know they want me for that El Paso case, but durn it, Davie, that's one thing I ain't never been mixed up in, robbin' th' mail. But you know what chance I'd have if I went back tuh stand trial. 'Spose I'll have tuh pesticate along th' trail agin."

"S'wat I thought. But, Reb, yuh can't go east, an' yuh can't go west without runnin' intuh them, and north is Prescott with plenty chances o' gettin' caught. If it wasn't fer th' Kid we cud hole out most anywhere fer a spell. What *is* that kid wuth, anyway, Reb?"

"Davie, I—I sorta hate tuh guess. With a six-gun he's got anything in this territory beat for speed. He's already quicker'n I am, an' 'most as ackrit. It would give yuh th' chills tuh see 'im fannin' them Colts, Davie. It jest don't seem possible that a kid of his age could be that good. They ain't no little plaster saints come around this here Bruncknow house, but th' Kid could pretty nearly have his back turned and beat any one of them to th' first shot. Yet right here's where th' saddle rubs, Davie. I ain't certain what he'd be like in a show-down. He's too nervous, an' I'm not so sure he wouldn't turn yaller if a pinch come. He's more dangerous than a side winder, if he only knew it."

THE old man nodded. "I told yuh, Reb, that it took more than natural quickness an' practice tuh make a good man with a gun. Yuh've gotta have somethin' else, somethin' you have, Reb, an' don't know it; confidence, I guess.

"But remember this, Reb. When it comes to th' real squeeze, th' most dangerous hellion in th' world is th' man that's scared 'most tuh death.

"Now my idee is this. Why not mosey over tuh th' Santa Cruz an' hole up fer a spell? Remember where Fort Buchanan stood when th' stage line went through? Well, between there an' where Tubac usta be is an old silver mine across th' river. I know a bunch of th' boys there an' we cud stay as long as need be. What say?"

"Yuh old horned toad, you goin' too? Well, yuh know th' way, an' mebbe we'd better. When d'yuh s'pose that marshal will show up?"

"Not 'fore tomorrer. It's near sixty mile tuh where we're goin', but by startin' early mebbe we cud make it to th' Santa Cruz 'fore night. Seen any 'Paches lately?"

"Couple o' th' boys comin' in early from up th' border way was jumped last week by a half a dozen or so, but they got in all right, though their ponies were in bad shape when they got here. Le's go tell th' Kid, he'll prob'ly be tickled tuh death tuh go. I'd leave him here an' go alone if I was a little more sure of him an' th' boys here."

The tall youth received the news without comment, though his dark eyes and slender hands betrayed a nervousness Davie Hardy was quick to notice. The old man's face hardened a little as he watched the Kid and he tried to picture himself as he was when fifteen years old.

"Th' Kid has everything 'cept what he

needs the most," mused Hardy. "A show-down 'ud either make or break him, an' if it broke him I wouldn't give dobie dollar fer a bale o' his skins."

IT LACKED an hour of sunrise the next morning when the three travelers left the silent adobe on the hillside and rode downward toward the San Pedro. Far to the west a great red moon dropped down behind a jagged peak in the Huachucas, and Davie Hardy shook his grizzled head.

"It's a bloody moon, Reb. Wonder who it's fer?"

Cantrell laughed and would have responded, but the old trapper held up a hand for silence. Far to the south where the flanks of the Mule Mountains grudgingly retreated eastward from the San Pedro valley came a faint ripple of rifle fire. The two men listened intently for a moment, wondering who it was caught by fate in that savage land.

"'Paches have jumped some prospector, prob'ly," said Cantrell, throwing the lead line over the pack mule's back and swinging his horse to the south. Without a word Davie Hardy followed, glancing at the heavy buffalo gun held athwart his saddle. The Kid, unaware that Hardy's keen eyes were watching him, took one long look toward the trail ahead and then he too turned and followed the others.

Riding warily across dry washes and around mighty boulders, the three made their way southward, striving to read in the sound of firing ahead the story of that battle in the hills. Finally, leaving the horses at the bottom of a dry wash, Cantrell led a cautious advance up the rocky slope until the three men were peering around an outcropping into a large steep walled arroyo.

Cantrell's Kid shuddered as he took in the scene below. Behind a cluster of large granite boulders on the sandy floor of the arroyo a half dozen men crouched, their blankets strewn near by, as though they had been peacefully sleeping when the first shots of their savage attackers had awakened them. Near one of the blankets lay a still form, its outstretched arm still grasping a rifle. Here and there below him and across on the opposite slope the Kid caught glimpses of naked bodies wriggling around the rocks or dirty turbans that sank out of sight after every lazy white puff of smoke told of another shot fired at the besieged.

"Some of Geronimo's hellions," whispered Cantrell to Hardy. "Must be at least fifty of them. Boys are makin' a good stand, ain't they?"

"By the lord Harry, Reb, know who them fellers be?" asked Hardy excitedly. "That hombre down thar is that marshal er I'll eat a beaver."

"Yes, an' there's Dog Face Smith too. How did they get here?"

"Snuk down this way yesterday afternoon, prob'ly expected to walk in on us from the south unexpected like this mornin'—Well, here's where Old Betsy gits intuh action. It's light enough now, an' I'm gonna sneak down tuh that bunch of rocks so's tuh be off th' skyline, an' get me a few skelps. You can sorta cover me with that new-fangled rifle till I get sot."

Cantrell smiled grimly as he glanced down at his new '73 model Winchester and motioned the other on. Turning to the youth he said, "Better stay here for now, Kid. Too bad yuh ain't got a rifle. Davie an' me's goin' tuh work down tuh them rocks an' open up from there. These durn 'Paches don't know we're here yet, an' we'll have 'em on the run in a few minutes. See yuh later." And with a wry grin at the white face of the Kid, Reb Cantrell turned to go to the aid of the men who had sworn to "bring him in."

LEFT alone on the hilltop, Cantrell's Kid peered around the granite outcropping at the grim battle below him, every detail visible now. The sun leaped up above a ridge behind him and shone on the opposite side of the arroyo, though the slope directly below was still in shadow. He watched the old trapper crawling down toward the clump of rocks with Cantrell following about forty yards behind. Neither man had dared to fire yet; the top of the ridge had been too exposed to defend, and there was little or no intervening cover until the rocks were reached.

Suddenly the watcher on the ridge saw a startled turbaned head rise from behind a clump of bear grass less than a hundred feet from the crawling Hardy. A snakelike arm swung a rifle around and the Apache fired a fraction of a second before Cantrell's Winchester spoke from up the slope. The Kid, scarcely noticing the Indian pitch forward on his face, saw the old trapper's body jerk as the heavy slug hit it, and the next moment watched Cantrell running downhill toward cover.

A dozen slinking forms had already turned to face this new enemy and bullets droned past the outcropping where the Kid lay. A weakness swept over him and he buried his face in his hands, shuddering. Old Uncle Davie gone and Dad Cantrell there in the middle of them! Almost against his will he raised his head again and peered down, just in time to see the little man stagger and slump down among the boulders in the little clump. A black head cautiously rose into sight, then another, as the Apaches near by started to creep toward the jumble of rocks.

A nausea gripped the youth on the ridge and he slid backward, until rising weakly to his feet he leaned against the side of the outcropping. Bitter futile curses dropped from his lips and hot tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there a moment, while his eyes swept backward to where the horses stood at the bottom of the dry wash. He felt a sudden longing to go down there and mount one of them and flee at top speed, away, anywhere to get away from this hellish scene.

THEN something inside him seemed to snap, his sagging shoulders straightened, and his white face took on a strained look as he stepped unsteadily around the boulder and began walking straight downward toward that fatal clump of rocks. Every step he took seemed to strengthen him; every forward movement gave him a new feeling of mastery. Here was death waiting for him; good, he would go to meet it as these others had gone, simply, gallantly, and fighting to the end.

He had taken over a score of steps before the warriors on the hillside, intent on their devilish work, caught sight of the slight figure walking calmly toward them, a heavy Colt poised in each hand. Somehow, it never entered the Kid's head to take cover; but unconsciously he was doing the thing best suited for the occasion. Outlined against the blazing morning sun he made the poorest kind of target, and the very fearlessness of his advance astonished his foes.

Now all the wizardry and wisdom of Cantrell's teaching came to him, and catlike he strode, his quick sharp eyes darting from side to side. An old warrior turned on an elbow and raised his rifle only to pitch forward with a bullet through the brain. Again and again the heavy Colts roared on the hillside, and even Reb Cantrell could have found no fault with the Kid's accuracy now. A wily savage, carefully hidden, slowly brought his rifle to bear on the advancing figure when a slight gleam of sunlight on the barrel brought a heavy slug crashing through his body. A young warrior, naked except for a dirty loin cloth, sprang to his feet shouting a sudden defiance, and shouting, died.

The Kid, intent only on the work at hand, did not hear the cheering of the men at the bottom of the arroyo nor the redoubled firing with which they were helping to cover his advance. But approaching the clump of rocks he saw Cantrell, one hand held against a bleeding side, throw down one empty revolver and reach for the other, and the heart of the Kid swelled almost to bursting when he caught the look on the little man's face.

"Get down, Kid, oh, get down, you fool," Cantrell cried weakly as the youth approached, but the Kid, with only two unused cartridges left in his two revolvers, walked past him without halting.

There were now no Apaches facing him on that side of the ring. A score of warriors, crawling hurriedly from the vicinity, were now and then looking back in a kind of awe at that solitary figure on the hillside that seemed to smile at death and march with the unhurried certainty of fate. The Kid heard the hammer snap on an empty chamber as he attempted a long shot at a bobbing turban, and turned back toward the rocks where Cantrell lay. Had he been standing a few minutes afterward on the outcropping he had so lately left, he could have seen a dejected band of Geronimo's warriors mount their ponies far down the arroyo and file away toward the south.

THE firing had ceased when the Kid returned to find Cantrell painfully crawling to the side of old Davie Hardy. A reaction set in and he shivered from head to foot while the tears stole down his dusty cheeks as he stooped over his two friends.

Davie Hardy beckoned to him with a languid hand, and the Kid dropped down to listen.

"Oh, boy, boy," the old trapper said almost in a whisper, "yuh come through at th' showdown jest as I hoped yuh would. Yo're 'wakin' now, Kid, an' I'm proud, so proud. An' so would Molly an' Kate be. Take my hand, Kid, fer I'm goin' out. 'Now I lay me down—'" and the spirit of another gallant gentleman slipped over the Great Divide.

The Kid laid the old head gently down and rose to his feet; his eyes blurred with scalding tears.

"Damn you," he cried bitterly, shaking a clinched fist at the grim, iron-hard ridges around him. "I wish I'd never seen yuh, and I hope t' God I never see yuh again."

Little did Cantrell's Kid know that less than seven years afterward, and but a few miles from this very spot, he was to go fighting to his death while guns flamed above him in a wild mining town not yet born.

He heard the sound of approaching feet and turned to see the men from the posse approaching. Wonderingly they crowded around him, and with a rough gentleness lifted the wounded and the dead man in their arms and bore them down to the bed of the long-vanished stream. The Kid, walking beside them, smiled happily through his tears as he heard Reb Cantrell cursing weakly when one of his bearers stumbled.

" 'Sall right, Dad, we'll soon have yuh fixed up fine," he said. "Does it hurt yuh much?"

Meanwhile a badly wounded United States marshal, his head resting on a folded blanket, slowly tore to bits a warrant for the arrest of one Reb Cantrell, wanted at El Paso on a charge of robbing the mail, and when the Kid drew close he called him to his side.

"Shake, young man," he said, reaching out his hand, while his cool, steady eyes studied the youth. "I've never seen a finer exhibition of cold nerve in my life." Then reaching into his pocket he drew forth a gold watch, the gift of great state for a deed men would not soon forget. This he pressed into the Kid's hand.

"Take it, my boy, I'm sorta ashamed tuh wear it after what I've seen this morning."

The Kid looked at the gorgeous thing and seeing the words engraved on it, slowly spelled them out:

"Without Fear and Without Reproach."

In next month's issue *Everybody's* will publish the first chapters of a NOVEL by

CAPTAIN DINGLE

"*Flying Kestrel*"

IT IS a brutal story of the sea and of men driven by starvation and hardship beyond their endurance into mutiny. It is also a story of a captain, mad with ambition, and of a woman who loves him. Most important of all, it is, we believe, Captain Dingle at his best.

A Racing Story

Billygoat *ROW* Hops *to* It

By Atreus von Schrader

LIKE a fleeing wraith out of the early morning mist, that lay over the Fairview Track, a golden sorrel mare came around the turn and into the stretch. Her rider, crouching low on her withers, held her to a long smooth stride, and on the cushion of damp earth her hooves sounded like pattering raindrops.

Sunny Jim Dollom, bulking huge in the faint light, stood beside the track rail at the judges' stand, and as the sorrel swept by in a rush of warm air, he clicked the stop-watch in his hand. He peered at it closely, then he peered again, and he was nodding in deep approval when Mike McCarthy, the wizened, sharp featured little jockey, half owner with Dollom of their modest string, brought the mare sidling and reaching back from the track.

Mike slipped from the saddle and took the blanket from his partner's arm. "Nice, huh? What's th' clock say?" he asked, drawing the blanket over the sweat-stained, eager sorrel.

"It says a sweet mile, if you were layin' back as hard as you looked to be." Sunny Jim pursed his lips and closed one eye. "A mile in 1:44 under wraps. . . an' not breathin' heavy after it. . . looks like she's ready."

Mike watched the mare as she nibbled at his sleeve. "She tried t'pull me over her head all th' way around," he grinned happily. "If she don't make th' rest of th' bang-tails crawl t'morrow, I'm a double-ended dumbbell. C'mon, let's go home."

Beyond the big empty grand stand, yawning like a vast pale mouth, the partners left the track and with their Butterfly mare behind them started up the dirt road that led to Billygoat Row, the long barns at the head of the first turn where they stabled their horses. Mike unsaddled the sorrel while Sunny Jim struggled with the padlock on the door of the stall where they kept their gear, and brought out a halter and stable sheet. There are no watchmen in Billygoat, Row, for watchmen cost money. It is open to all, even to the sheriff, since debts can not be paid unless races are won, and it is hard to win races with platers and cast-offs.

Of their string of four, Butterfly alone had quality, and on the slender golden sorrel they had spent long weeks of training. She was entered in the Flinders Mile the next day, and upon her they pinned their hopes of winning the five thousand dollar purse, wealth untold in Billygoat Row, almost beyond attempt.

FOR half an hour Mike walked the mare slowly up and down, while other owners brought out their animals and with water-buckets, rubbing-cloths and brushes began the busy race-track work day.

As Mike led Butterfly back into her stall he saw coming toward them across the yard a hatchet-faced individual named Lloyd, better known as Sell-you-Lloyd, trainer for State Senator Clymer who owned a pretentious string and housed them in luxurious stables at the opposite end of the track. Lloyd had the courage of his employer's convictions, which were that races were run to be won, regardless, and the Clymer stable won many.

Mike had finished with Butterfly and turned to leave the stall when he heard Dollom, apparently in answer to a question, say, "Th' mare ain't for sale, an' that's that."

He joined them in time to see Lloyd's long upper lip curl in a snarl of anger, "Think you've got th' Flinders already won? We're in it, and there's others. . . and I don't mind tellin' you Billygoat bums there's more'n one way to lose a race," he said unpleasantly.

Sunny Jim turned to his small partner, "Hear th' birdie sing?" then to Lloyd, "Maybe that's why you're hangin' around here again. I've told you we won't sell th' mare."

Lloyd threw up his head like a badly bitted horse, and he looked at them slantwise, suddenly crafty. "Listen. . . th' senator wants the Flinders bad. We know your pony's got a chance, if she ain't bumped or cut off or anything. . . . He paused and glanced swiftly up and down the Row, but no one was within ear-shot. "I'd hate t'see a couple of good guys get a race spoilt. Why can't we fix it up nice. . ." he spoke to Mike, "you could easy pull th' mare a little or let her run wide. . . an' I can make it worth your while."

He was interrupted by a deep chuckle from Sunny Jim, who had put a heavy hand on Mike's shoulder, for Mike was quivering like a terrier in leash and his sunburned face had gone pale with fury. "Shut up, Mike!" said the big trainer, then, "Ain't Lloyd th' little joker? First we ain't got a show, an' then he wants t'buy th' mare, an' now he wants her pulled." Dollom spoke in a loud, clear voice, and Lloyd winced visibly. Still holding Mike under his big paw, Sunny Jim went on: "Lloyd, I've known you since you were a sneakin' tout suckin' around th' barns f'r inside dope. You were a crook then, an' you haven't changed any, even if you are trainin' f'r a state senator." The big voice deepened. "You slip back an' tell your boss th' mare ain't f'r sale, either way. We'll win th' Flinders if we can, but we won't sell it. An' you might start before I get mad an' hurt you, or turn Mike loose, you slimy snake-in-th'-grass. Git!"

Lloyd saw sudden peril in the agate-hard gray eyes boring into him. He started to speak, changed his mind, and departed silently.

"Whew. . . ." Sunny Jim wiped a red bandanna across his brow, then to Mike, who had said nothing at all, "You'd make a nice play, climbin' on Lloyd. Get yourself pinched an' stuck in th' hoosegow, an' then where'd we be? You can't fight Senator Clymer, not around here." A slow smile broke the hard lines in Dollom's face. "Say can't a guy ask you t'throw a race without your wantin' t'paste him?"

"Steady, mare. . . save it f'r tomorrow." Mike reined Butterfly to a walk as a quail burst from the roadside like a small bob, and his mount plunged and snorted. It was late afternoon, and he had brought her out for a quiet walk on the soft dirt road that led from the track into the country beyond. The mellow autumn sun bathed them in a warm glow. Sumac blazed along the fences, and the fox-grapes had begun to turn.

Mike whistled happily to himself. The sorrel's gallop that morning had proved her ready. If they could win the Flinders Mile. . . .

Suddenly the jockey stiffened in his saddle. Down the road back of them came a swift drum-fire of hooves, and around a curve a hundred yards away galloped a big bay, nostrils belled and gleaming with sweat.

"Hell. . . ." Mike bent the mare aside as the other horse pounded past. Then he started to turn her around, and stopped. "If he gets a chance t'chase us on this tow-path, he'll run us to rags."

The man on the bay was one Splitlip Durgin, a silent, brutish hanger-on of the Clymer establishment, where he rubbed and fed and watered horses for his board, and was said to do occasional strong-arm work for Lloyd.

Mike swung the mare back to the road as Durgin pulled the lathered bay to a stop and came toward them, until he blocked their way. "Well, here we are," he spoke hoarsely, out of one side of his mouth. "You seem t'think a lot of that hammerhead. Like t'try a race?" The man who does not care what happens to his horse has a big advantage over the man who does.

Mike sat Butterfly quietly. Durgin outweighed him by forty pounds, and the bay, a cast-off steeplechaser, stood a hand taller than the mare. "What's th' big idea?" he said.

Durgin sank his voice to a heavy whsiper: "You know, all right enough. His nibs wants th' Flinders. Lloyd sent me out here after you t'see if we couldn't fix it up. He got Dollom sore about somethin', an' he thought maybe you'd have more sense."

Mike stared at him for the space of a long breath. "Jim told Lloyd t'go t'hell this mornin'. I'm tellin' you th' same sweet words."

"Guess Lloyd was wrong," said Durgin, imperturbably. "It ain't no bark off my tree, but if you don't take Lloyd's offer, I'm goin' t'spoil that mare so she can't run in anythin' tomorrow."

Mike looked around. He could not run, for that would be sure ruin to the mare. Abruptly he made up his mind. "Easy, lady. . ." and he guided her off the road, dropped from the saddle and slipped his reins over the top of a decrepit fence. Then he turned to Durgin: "You big piece of cheese, come on down here an' I'll give you somethin' t'take back t'Lloyd."

Durgin grinned and dismounted heavily, keeping his reins in his left hand. He had Mike where he wanted him. Without a word he stooped, and a stone whistled over Mike's head. It crashed into the underbrush, and Butterfly lunged wildly. "Sure. . . c'mon get me," said Durgin, and threw another stone, this time at the mare. Mike stopped it with his bare upthrown arm, and cold fear came with the impact. If Butterfly were hit, she'd break away, and if she broke and ran over the uneven road, their long-held hopes would go with her.

The next stone hit Mike on the cheekbone, cutting a gash, so that blood ran salt and bitter over his lips. "Some day I'll see you breakin' rocks instead of throwin' 'em," he muttered through set teeth.

The one-sided battle went on. Durgin would pick up a stone, hurl it at the frightened mare and Mike would stop it with some part of himself, trying desperately between times to soothe her. The performance took on a hideous rhythm, repeated endlessly, and as his blood dried in a crimson bar across his cheek Mike found himself growing dazed, and the ground under him began to heave and sway. He shook his head savagely to clear his brain, and as Durgin started to throw again he held up his hand. "Got you, bo?"

"I guess you got us by th' short hairs. I'm ready t'talk turkey." He patted the mare's neck and then walked slowly toward his enemy, a slump-shouldered, disconsolate little figure.

"Kinda rocked some sense into you? 'Bout time. . . ." Splitlip dropped the stone into the dust beside him.

WITH a whine of eagerness Mike was upon him, aflame to get at the man who had tried to hurt Butterfly. "'Bout time is right . . . only it's my time. . ." he barked, and landed three blows on Durgin's face before that surprised bearer of Lloyd's message thought to drop his horse's reins and defend himself. The big bay, freed, whirled with a grunt and cantered off down the road toward home as Mike flung himself under the other's guard and sank a fist in Splitlip's mid-section.

Durgin, gasping for breath, grappled him, and Mike crooked a leg behind the other's heels, bringing them to the ground with a crash. Mike was the quicker, and a writhing, twisting heave landed him on top, astride the heavier man. Both knees gripping to the last ounce, he set to work to pound his enemy's head to a jelly.

"Fix it up, huh?" panted Mike, "buy us off, would you, or ruin th' mare?" He timed his words with blows and had successfully closed one of Durgin's eyes when that worthy stopped struggling. "I got enough. . . plenty," he croaked. Mike sat quiet for a moment, taking stock of his foe. "You got somethin' t'take back t'Lloyd, anyhow," he observed, and got up.

SPLITLIP arose and straightened himself painfully, squinting at Mike in amazement. "I ought t'have ate you alive. . ." and he felt gingerly of his right eye, which had taken on the general shape of a tomato. Mike was a gory ruin himself, for the blood from his cut cheek had smeared, and his shirt was a tattered fringe.

Durgin watched him as he walked to the pawing mare by the fence. "All right, girl. . ." and for a little he held to the slender golden neck, faint and weak.

Then he untied her reins and led her back to the road. Butterfly was quivering with nervousness, and when he tried to reach his stirrup she sidled away. Then he tried to mount her from a stump, but she would not stand still. Abruptly it occurred to him that he would be more helpless than ever if Durgin cared to continue the battle. He slipped to the mare's off side and pulled the stirrup-leather from its guard under the saddle-flap. The heavy doubled strap with the steel stirrup at its end would be a formidable weapon.

Durgin saw the point, and a lopsided smile spread across his battered face. "She's all steamed up. You won't never get on her by yourself," he said, "wait a minute an' I'll give you a hoist," and started toward them. Mike glared at him derisively. "A fine fat chance. . ." he answered, and swung the stirrup strap threateningly. Then he remembered the long two miles between there and Billygoat Row, and that it was time for the mare's feed, and that he was very tired. He looked at Splitlip again. The larger man, his eye closed tight, was standing quietly a dozen feet away, his arms limp at his sides.

"You needn't fret. I'm through," he said. "Lloyd told me t'muss up you an' th' hay-burner. Instead, you beat th' tar outa me. I don't get paid f'r that. C'mon, I'll put you up, honest."

"I need a hand bad. I'd be obliged t'you. . . but if you make any funny move I'll cut you open with this thing," said Mike slowly.

"Sure. . . that's all right." Durgin came up and patted the sorrel's shoulder. "Listen," he growled, "any bimbo that'll fight f'r a horse like you did gets under my hide. I'm for you, see, you damn little pinch o' pepper. An' if you c'n ride her like you rode me, you'll come near winnin' th' Flinders t'morrow, an' t'hell with Lloyd an' Clymer." He stooped, cupped his hands and lifted Mike cleanly into the saddle. The jockey gathered his reins and looked down at his late enemy. "You're th' first sign o' white I've seen around th' Clymer barns yet," he said. "Thanks. . ." He replaced the stirrup leather as Butterfly danced under him. "Guess I'll go along now. If you c'n climb a couple of fences, you'll save distance by cuttin' through that patch o' woods," he pointed the way. "Well, so long." Durgin smiled again the lopsided smile. "I wish you luck, McCarthy," he said, as Mike let the fretting mare start homeward down the silent road.

IT WAS nearly dusk when he drew near the long row of stalls, where Sunny Jim was pacing anxiously up and down. As he caught sight of the pair, the big trainer hurried toward them, and Mike slid to the ground beside his partner. "She ain't hurt. Ain't even scratched," he said quickly, in answer to the swift fear in Dollom's eyes. Sunny Jim took in the details of his ruin, and his heavy jaw thrust forward. "Who's been tearin' you up?" he asked.

Mike told him of the encounter with Durgin, and its aftermath. "He was just doin' what Lloyd told him. Anyhow, he was decent to us after it was over."

"Sure he was, after you taught him not t'monkey with th' buzz-saw."

"Maybe. But I think he meant it, an' if he hadn't given me a hand when th' mare wouldn't let me up, I'd 'a' been in a jam. His skate left when th' rumpus started."

"Nice gang, Clymer an' Lloyd. I'd like t'get th' senator off in a quiet place myself, sometime, or th' both of them," rumbled Sunny Jim.

"Let's put th' lady horse away. It's feedin' time an' she's had plenty t'stir her up. I want t'get her quieted, so she c'n rest good."

It was then they found the snake in Butterfly's stall.

Sunny Jim had taken up a pitchfork. "Wait a minute 'till I fix her beddin'. I went over to th' track office t'pay th' rest of our fee in th' Flinders a while ago, an' I've been watchin' f'r you ever since," and he vanished into the warm gloom of Butterfly's loose box.

Mike heard him tossing straw. Then came a bellow, and sounds of furious stamping. A moment later Sunny Jim reappeared, a four-foot blacksnake writhing on the tines of the fork. The big man was in a cold sweat as he threw it far away into the long grass behind the Row.

"Gettin' rough around here," and he wiped his brow. "If we'd put th' mare in there an' she'd heard that thing rustlin' she'd 'a' gone clean through th' side of th' stall."

"Must 'a' crawled in lookin' f'r rats," said Mike.

His partner looked down at him in scorn. "Rats?" he shook his head, "Nope. It wasn't rats. Snakes can't open doors, an' they don't go crawlin' around any place full o' people an' horses like this. That snake was put in there. . . ." Dollom paused, then, "Put th' mare away. I want t'think a minute.

MIKE led Butterfly into her stall and made her comfortable. He came out to find Sunny Jim standing like a monument in the dusk. "I got it," said the big man quietly. "It all ties in. If I didn't know Senator Clymer'd pull strings an' get us ruled off th' track one way or another, I'd go an' pay a call on Sell-you-Lloyd. Listen . . . when I was comin' back from th' track, maybe an hour ago, I passed that pockmarked coon that gallops horses f'r Lloyd. He was headed away from here, an' he had a sack, an' he looked at me like th' cat that's finished with th' canary. Don't you see what happened?" Mike shook his head and Sunny Jim went on: "Durgin's skate came back to th' barn by himself. They could guess he hadn't got away with beatin' you up. Anyhow, it would look doubtful," he stopped suddenly. "Gosh! Remember I told Lloyd he was a slimy snake-in-th'-grass this mornin'? Maybe that gave him his bright idea. An' he sends th' coon over here, takin' th' chance I'll be out o' sight f'r a minute. Th' snake couldn't hurt th' mare, but it could scare her half t'death, an' that would be all Lloyd wanted, with th' race t'morrow."

"Wasn't such a bad idea, was it?" said Mike. "An' what's th' use bein' senator an' ownin' everythin' around th' damn track if you can't fix things up like you want 'em?" He began to laugh hysterically, and then he rocked back and forth, torn with racking sobs. "D'you know. . . I'm beginnin' t'think th' senator does want th' race. . . just like Durgin said," he gasped brokenly.

Sunny Jim had his arms around his partner. "Hold on Mike. Th' mare ain't hurt. Nothin's bothered her yet. . . you know that. . ." and for a moment the two stood as one in the merciful dusk. A shuddering tremor shook the jockey, and Dollom heard his teeth grit as he got hold of himself: "Kinda got my goat, I guess. . . it's been a sort o' busy afternoon. . ." he said, then, "What time is it, anyhow?" Dollom fumbled at his pocket, hesitated, and finally answered, "I wasn't goin' t'tell you. But I had t'hock th' watch to pay th' last of th' mare's fee. We've been runnin' close," he said.

Swiftly Mike laughed, "Got th' watch too, huh? An' my goat. . . . Well, here we are. They got us t'watch t'morrow!" He stopped abruptly, and from back of them came the soft swish and rustle of Butterfly at her hay.

"I'm goin' t'stay here with th' mare," he went on. "You go an' get some supper an' bring me a couple o' sandwiches an' a pail o' coffee from Ma Riley's." Mike picked up the stable fork, tilted a chair against the whitewashed wall of the mare's stall and sat down. Sunny Jim hesitated. "Kinda thought I'd stay here," he said, then, "Maybe you're right. If you ate a big supper you'd have t'sweat it off, an' you've sweat enough f'r one day. If anybody comes around, you stick him first an' ask what he wants afterward." The big man lumbered out of the yard and down the path that led to the town of Fairview and Ma Riley's boarding-house, where the partners and most of their colleagues of Billygoat Row had their meals.

MIKE sat silent, the fork like a trident in his hand, and watched the slow stars come out one by one. Around him were the stable-sounds of horses eating and rustling as they moved, and from the infield, scarcely visible beyond the white track rails, began the nightly chorus of frogs and the calls and answers of the whippoorwills. At the far end of the track, on a rise that lifted beyond the stretch turn, he could see the row of lights that measured the length and magnificence of the Clymer stables, where the big owners kept their strings.

Mike drowsed in the warm, scented dark, shook himself awake, and finally took up a sentry-go up and down in front of Butterfly's stall, lest he fall asleep. It was a grim little figure that faced him when Sunny Jim returned, the pitchfork held at a murderous angle.

"It's me. An' here's enough f'r an elephant," he announced. "When I told Ma Riley you were stayin' here she began packin' feed 'till I told her you'd bust, or break th' mare's back," and he handed Mike a block of sandwiches, a small pail of coffee and a big piece of cake. "A fine woman, Maggie Riley is," he went on, as Mike began to eat. "She saw my watch-chain was gone, an' she had t'know why. I told her," Sunny Jim paused. "She ain't what you'd call rich, runnin' a boardin'-house in a hick town, but she wanted t'lend us fifty dollars right like that! 'Sure, I'll not be missin' it, me bhoy,' she says, an' starts down into her stockin'."

MIKE ate in silence, and the good coffee gurgled down his throat before he spoke, "Funny, ain't it, th' way things get mixed up?"

"If you mean that we're in a tight place, th' answer is yes."

"I mean that. . . an' a lot more." Mike finished the last of his food and put the pail down beside him. It was dark but for the faint starlight, and his voice came through the warm night like the voice of a spirit. "Ma Riley, tryin' t'make a livin', offers us a loan. You an' me, tryin' t'make our feed-bills with one race mare an' some skates, we need money like we need our eye-teeth, but somethin' stops us from takin' it from Lloyd t'throw a race." The voice stopped, and then went on: "Maybe not takin' things like that is a luxury f'r poor guys, like wearin' old shoes; or maybe that's why they're poor." Sunny Jim said nothing, and Mike considered his thought.

"'Wonder if havin' things your own way gets you so's you can't stand not havin' 'em? I mean like Clymer. He's rich an' he's got a barn full of horses, an' he makes speeches an' people clap him, an' everythin'. . . an' he's set enough on winnin' th' Flinders t'morrow t'try to bribe us, an' then bust th' mare up, or me, an' then stick a snake in her stall t'scare her into fits. Th' race can't mean such a lot t'him, an' we're shootin' th' works on it, but he'll do things t'get it we wouldn't. Ain't that funny?"

"Funny ain't just th' word I'd pick, but it'll do. An' I c'n do without th' luxury of not winnin' t'morrow." Sunny Jim rubbed his chin until the bristles rasped through the dark, "All th' same, I'd rather be sittin' here with nothin' in sight but th' long chance of a race than be th' senator. An' we don't know what he's got goin' on inside," he said slowly.

"Nothin'. He's lined with tin. It wouldn't be funny if guys like him had somethin' hurtin' 'em inside. Hurt runs off him like water off a duck." Mike got up and stretched himself. "'Guess I'll turn in. An' I guess I'll turn in with th' mare. I c'n sleep under th' manger, an' I want t'be near. It takes a blast t'wake you up, an' f'r all we know Lloyd's liable t'send around with a shotgun or an ax. I'll be glad when t'morrow's over," and Mike went into the empty stall that served the partners as sleeping quarters. He left his coat and shoes, and reappeared with an electric torch. "I'll take this. If I need help, I'll holler, an' you start comin'. Good night, Jim."

Butterfly greeted him with a sleepy whinny, and sniffed at him curiously as he curled himself under the manger on the side of the stall. He could feel her warm breath, and rubbed her satin nose. "Go on an' rest, lady. . . it's all right. I'm just kinda watchin' out," he told her, and fell asleep in the fragrant dark.

SUNNY JIM tossed for a time in their sleeping place, and finally came to rest on the tipped chair outside, the long-tined stable fork leaning beside him. "Guess I c'n get to 'em quicker," he muttered sleepily, and his placid snores added to the thousand noises of the night-quiet.

Nothing happened, and Mike waked to find the sun blazing in on him and Butterfly breathing in his face. He rose, and found Sunny Jim slumped down in his chair, the fork beside him, oblivious alike to the bright morning and the sounds of Billygoat Row as horses were led out and the yard pump began to creak. Mike shook him by the shoulder. "Hey, feller, it's time t'get up."

The big trainer opened an eye, yawned hugely and looked around. "We get a dry track, an' that won't hurt us any. How's th' mare?"

"Fine as silk," Mike nodded down across

the green infield. "Not a peep from Lloyd. Must 'a' figured that snake would keep her in a sweat all night. An' it would if you hadn't found it. One o' these days I'm goin' t'stuff a snake down that bird's throat. We'll do it today if th' mare can come home in front. That'll hurt him worse'n a sack full o' snakes."

WHEN Butterfly had been watered and fed and rubbed until she shone like pale gold in the strong sunshine, Dollom set off for Ma Riley's, and Mike ate the breakfast his partner again brought him. Then they sat through the interminable hours that must pass before a race. There was nothing to say, and little to do except gulp nervously and look now and again toward the grand stand to see if the big flags had been raised.

For the third time Mike burnished the stirrups on the light racing saddle and tested the slender girth and surcingle. Then he brought out the mare's bridle and fiddled with that, while Sunny Jim went over the worn orange silk jacket and white breeches, stained with the mud and dust of three seasons' racing. "'Guess we'll have t'get us another set o' colors soon," he remarked. "Look kinda ratty," Mike nodded. "Yep," and fell to his bit polishing.

Billygoat Row was deserted but for an occasional horse being walked. Mike ate no lunch before riding, and Sunny Jim kept him company. When everything that could be done had been done and done again, they sat and tried not to catch each other's eyes, in a silence that rang in their ears.

At last it was time to go. They measured progress at the track by the crash of the band between races. "Well, let's start," said Sunny Jim, and Mike was on his feet at the word. "All right," he answered, in a voice that was cracked and dry.

Sunny Jim led Butterfly, sheeted and hooded to her dainty ears, and Mike, in full regalia, carried the saddle. .He was riding at a hundred and ten pounds, and needed no weight-pad.

The big grand stand was packed, and other hundreds filled the lawn in front and lined the white track-rail as they approached the paddock. From the opposite direction came Sell-you-Lloyd, leading the big brown Gwilt, the Clymer entry for the Flinders, with Slattery, the stable jockey, and a retinue of helpers. A moment later a second group appeared, made up of Senator Clymer and his friends coming to look at his horse. The senator was immaculate in white, from his buckskin shoes to his Panama hat, and he produced the effect of a large stomach, expensively clad, propelled from behind by some one else.

"If clothes made a race, we'd be pullin' a plow," said Mike, and grinned for the first time that day.

"But they don't. You go get weighed. I'll keep th' mare here."

Mike threaded his way through the milling crowd to the scales, hopped into the chair and was waved away by the clerk as Slattery came up in the resplendent purple and gold cap, Clymer colors, his saddle and weight-pad on his arm, for he needed ten pounds of lead to bring him to his allotted hundred and twenty-five pounds.

The partners stripped and saddled Butterfly and Mike prepared to mount. At which moment Sell-you-Lloyd came hurrying by on some last-minute errand. He saw them, and waved an airy hand, "You two billy-goats can't be blamed f'r buttin' in," he said, then, "If you don't want that Shetland pony run over, keep out of our way, see?"

Sunny Jim stared at the other and Mike could see the muscles on his neck harden into cords. Then the big trainer deliberately turned his back, and Lloyd hurried on. "If I'd said anythin' to that rat. I'd 'a' landed on him. . . ." Dollom was breathing deeply, "an' hittin' Clymer's trainer in th' paddock at this track would be as bad as touchin' his jockey after he was mounted. Lloyd was askin' us t'get ourselves ruled off. We fooled him, huh?"

Mike's answer was lost in the blare of the bugle calling the horses to the post. Sunny Jim stooped, cupped his big hands and hoisted his partner to the saddle. He held the mare by the bit and looked up. "They ain't beat us yet," he said, "hop to it, Mike."

The little jockey gathered his reins. "Our tail's up an' our ears are pinned back. We been worms. Now we're goin' t'fly—s'long—" and he guided the golden sorrel toward the wide paddock gate that led to the track.

There were five entries for the Flinders Mile, headed by Senator Clymer's Gwilt, made favorite as much on his ownership as on his speed, for the Clymer string had a name for winning. Slattery led the procession onto the track and up past the grand stand, while the scarlet-coated band outdid itself and the senator bowed acknowledgments from his box.

Next in line came the bright bay Osric, from the Crossland Stables, fast, but not known as a stayer over a distance. Behind Osric the blaze-faced Wearmouth, rearing and fighting for his head, took up half the track. He was locally owned, and got a cheer as he passed. Then followed the businesslike gray Canute, of the Pat Morrison string, slow, but able to gallop all day. Butterfly brought up the rear, while the crowd shouted for Gwilt. To the far end of the grand stand they paraded, and then back again to the start directly in front. The band stopped and a swift silence fell as they lined up.

Slattery had drawn the rail and Mike was third from him. He looked over at the Clymer entry and saw that Slattery carried a new and heavy whip . . . . "Ought t'stir up th' big sawhorse with that gad," he muttered, and winked derisively as he caught Slattery's eye. The Clymer jockey glared at him fiercely, whereat Mike thumbed his nose and the harassed starter roared. "Line 'em up, you push-cart riders!" and the packed grand stand hummed like a hive of bees.

FOR an instant the five heads showed in line, the jockeys a row of silhouettes against the blazing afternoon sun. The flag flashed down, and they were off.

Sunny Jim had worked his way to a place on the rail, and stood perspiring freely as the horses swirled and twisted at the post. He saw Mike get the mare away winging and sighed in vast relief, "Whew!"

After the scrambling rush of the start, Mike took Butterfly back under a strong hold, and as they charged the first turn he lay in third place. Two lengths ahead Gwilt galloped, with Osric lapped at his girth. Canute, the gray, was on his right, and just behind him Wearmouth still fought for his head. They swirled down the track like a flock of wheeling birds, flew around the curve in a cloud of dust and swung into the backstretch, silks crackling flagwise as the pace increased.

Slattery held the brown close to the rail on his left, and Mike kept his firm pull on the eager mare. Butterfly was going well within herself, and he meant to keep her strong for the finish. Also he could watch the Clymer jockey.

Half-way down the straight there came a rush of hooves and Wearmouth swept past, dragging his rider forward, clearly out of control he was, and running away. "That'll cook him, anyhow," Mike said to himself, and then, as the sorrel tried to follow, "Steady, girl . . . he'll be back," and he held her to her unbroken stride.

As they neared the stretch turn, Mike let her draw closer to the leaders, hoping for a chance to swing in between Gwilt and the rail if the big brown should go wide. Canute and Osric were galloping with him, like a circus team, and Wearmouth, tiring fast, struggled to hold his place beside them.

Less than a fourth of the distance remained, and Mike peered with half-shut eyes through the dust that came back. Butterfly bent to the turn, and came smoothly into the stretch, still two lengths behind, and Mike loosed his hold a little, "Lady horse, let's go get 'em—" he told her.

In a dozen jumps he caught and left the gray, for Canute was doing all he knew, and it was not good enough. A hundred yards farther he passed Wearmouth, killed off by his own pace. Osric and Gwilt were still locked, a scant length ahead, and like the roar of distant surf Mike could hear the grand stand calling.

A hundred yards from the finish Osric cracked. They left him spent and reeling and drew up to Slattery's right stirrup. The Clymer jockey looked around as he heard the patter of the mare's hooves, and Mike saw him crouch lower in the saddle. Less than five feet separated the two as they galloped.

"Sweetheart . . . c'mon . . . ." Mike's cheek was touching the mare's neck as he called on her. Inch by inch they caught the flying brown, and Mike listened for the sharp crack that would tell him Slattery had gone to his whip, the big new whip. He heard nothing.

Instead, he saw the head of the Clymer horse cease to drift back. He was holding the mare stride for stride, for all her splendid speed. "Lady—you got t'do better—" and his skillful hands lifted her ahead, helping her with every ounce of his whalebone body in a magnificent burst.

Gwilt clung to them, and then like an evil dream, the brown drew away. Remorselessly as a tide he was leaving the sorrel, and a cold wave of horror ran along Mike's spine. Slattery was sitting quiet, the butt of his whip against his mount's withers, and in maddened leaps, ears flat against his head, the Clymer horse held his terrible pace.

"Butterfly—hop to it!" Mike screamed, but she could do no more. A blast of sound from the grand stand told him the finish was near, and in three strides more Gwilt flashed across the line, a clear length ahead.

SUNNY JIM, on the rail, stood like a man of stone. He had seen their mare, running all out, caught and held and passed by the brown. The big man shook his head slowly as the crowd surged around him. "Well—that's that," he said, and climbed over the rail with Butterfly's blanket.

Then he saw Mike do something he had never done before. The little jockey had pulled the sorrel to a quick stop and he was bringing her back not at a walk but at a brisk trot. Mike pulled up beside him, signaled to the judges for permission to dismount, and slid to the ground beside his partner. He was trembling violently and he spoke between gasps, "Jim—will you take th' l-l-longest chance we ever took in our life?"

"Buck up, Mike. We've been beat before."

"Sure. . . but not like this. . . ." Mike looked around, to see Slattery pull up twenty feet away, where Sell-you-Lloyd awaited him, and beyond, just coming onto the track, Senator Clymer. The senator made a point of leading in his winners.

"Jim, it's a handspring into hell, but we got t'make it—here, take th' mare—" and Mike, reeling as he walked, crossed the track to the Clymer horse. Slattery dismounted, and as he hit the ground Mike wrenched the whip from his hand.

"Now he has spilled th' beans—an' we get th' bums' rush f'r tamperin' with another man's jockey." Sunny Jim watched Mike duck under Sell-you-Lloyd's arms and run back to him. "Here goes everythin'," he gasped, and pressed the whip-butt against Dollom's wrist. There was a faint crackling sound, and the big trainer jumped as if he had been stung. "He's got a battery in it—same as electric spurs. I knew that skate couldn't run th' way he did—an' Slattery carried th' bat queer—an' I guessed right. Look out, here comes Lloyd."

Dollom took the whip, and as Lloyd came up, his face contorted with rage, he clamped a huge hand on his shoulder. "We got you this time," he said quietly, and over Lloyd's head he saw Senator Clymer approaching.

"Lloyd, it's your turn t'do some quick thinkin'." Sunny Jim turned the whip butt up. On it were two small copper bumps, and Lloyd seemed to shrink as Dollom held them under his eyes. "You c'n go an' tell th' judges your jockey lost his weight-pad an' is disqualified. Or I'll take this thing to 'em, an' you an' Senator Clymer'll never run another horse."

Senator Clymer caught the last words, and turned the color of an oyster. For a moment he stared wide-eyed, and then without a word he walked away. Lloyd looked at his employer's departing back. "He would," he said bitterly, and to Dollom, "You win . . . I'll tell th' judges we're out."

"I'll be here, waitin'," answered Sunny Jim, and saw Lloyd start across the track to the judges' pavilion to disqualify his horse.

Still holding the Clymer whip he turned to Mike, standing beside the sweat-stained golden sorrel. "You rang th' big bell this time!"

"I'll tell th' cock-eyed world! Didn't I know their shark-bait couldn't live with th' lady-horse without some funny help?" The little jockey drew a deep breath, and a tired grin crept over his gaunt cheeks. "Say—remember what we was talkin' about last night? I mean about not takin' things bein' a luxury? Looks like th' senator gets th' luxury this time—an' we get th' race. Fair enough, huh?"

One of the stories we're particularly proud of in the next month's Everybody's is "Intercepted by Radio," by Ared White. It's a war story, and it's that sort of story we all love where a man performs a terrific act of heroism without realizing for one minute he is a hero.

The AIR RANGERS

The MEXICAN BORDER DOPE SMUGGLERS

A Battle in the Clouds

This is the Complete Novelette

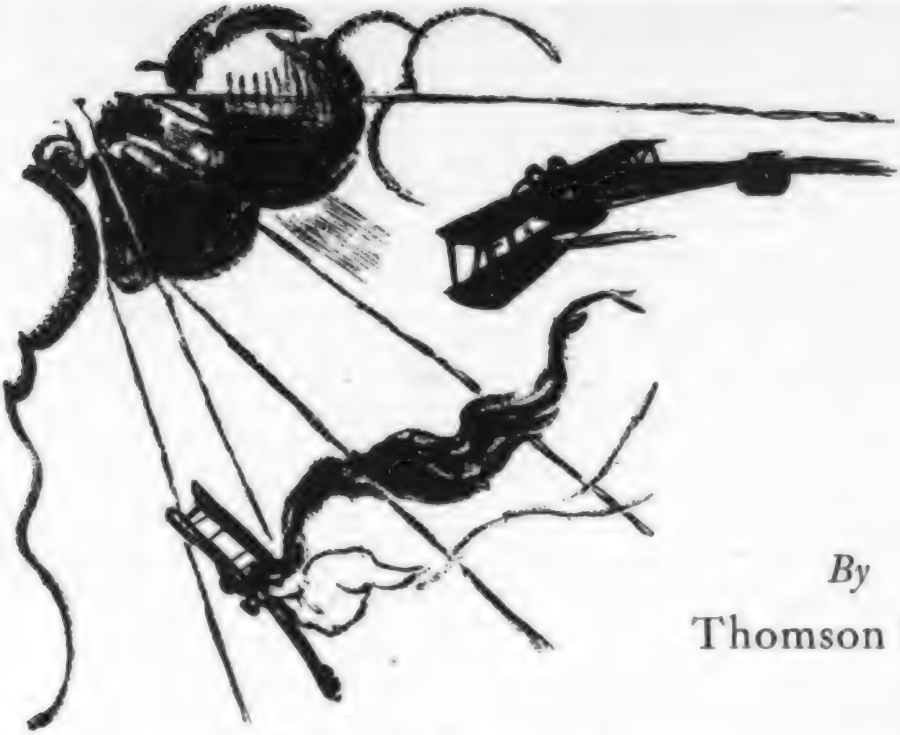
I HAD found, in my previous soirées as a member of the border patrol, that it was fairly customary down there for events to eventuate with considerable ease and fluency. Nevertheless, it remained for my last tour of duty to demonstrate that one never knows what's around the corner—in the Air Service. Just how I'd have felt as I came rolling into the frolicsome town of McMullen, Texas, had I known what was in store for me I know not. I anticipated a month or so along the banks of the Rio Grande with the old gang. Instead of that, I was doomed to collide with Mr. Percival Enoch O'Reilly for a considerable period, and to be hurled, as it were, into various matters in rapid succession. Such as the Bell-Farwell circus, for instance, and the flourishing village of Tampico, Mexico, and the huge dirigible hight "America." To say nothing of Mr. Frederich Von Sternberg, customarily called the Count.

However, that's overreaching myself as far as a candidate trying to be elected by the Prohibition party. The immediate business before the house concerns Percival Enoch O'Reilly—as most of the incidents in my life for the following three months concerned him—with the supporting cast including Dumpy Scarth.

I—I being first Lieutenant John Evans of the Army Air Service—had been stationed on the border, off and on, for nigh upon four years.

You may not know it, but the Army Air Service ran a patrol along the Rio Grande to supplement the efforts of the rangers, the cavalry, and the Customs Service in the unending struggle which goes on down there. Around a hundred picked flyers sent their De Haviland airplanes frolicking up and down that stretch of country several times a day, and the flights were always on the alert for a hurry call for help. McMullen was the most easterly station for the flyers, and the western end of the patrol was at Rockwell Field, which abuts on the Pacific Ocean. Other flights were at Laredo, Del Rio, Marfa, Sanderson, El Paso, Douglas, Nogales, etc., each consisting of around a dozen flyers and observers and a squad of mechanics.

A FEW months before this particular day, which found me making the last lap back to McMullen, I'd been ordered up north to Cook Field as a test pilot. Now I was on my way back, on temporary duty. Said duty concerned clearing up some army property which had been charged to me on the border, and which my successor, strange to say, could not find. Any army man who's ever had large property responsibility will understand thoroughly why



By
Thomson Burtis

featured on the Front Cover

it might be necessary for me to use my legal talents to save myself owing the government approximately ten times as much as my salary for life would amount to.

And I was curiously nervous and fidgety and happy, so to speak, as the dusty branch line train pulled into the well-remembered station. It was great to be home again. And when I slid off the steps, and beheld Captain Kennard, Lieutenants Jimmy Jennings, Sleepy Spears, George Hickman and others of the veterans, there to meet me, I forgot the blasting heat and the inch of dust with which I was covered. Along with them was Sheriff Bill Trowbridge, leading minion of the law for Hidalgo County, and Mayor Sam Edwards, and a few other local lights who'd played poker, chased smugglers, or gone for a ride with the dozen flyers who'd made up the McMullen flight for five years.

Sounds as though I was some conquering hero returning to an ovation. That, brethren, is indeed far from the truth. The simple facts were that McMullen considered the airmen as part of the town. They knew every one of us personally, appreciated having the advertisement which the gang gave the town, and had been mixed up with various of our enterprises in no uncertain manner. Many a thing had happened in five years—and the town knew every one of them. And naturally some of the inhabitants, like the gargantuan old sheriff, for instance, had worked alongside us in a dozen different battles against the scum which infests the border. I was just one of the town boys coming home.

There being but one train a day from San Antone into McMullen, there was always a big crowd out to see that it came to rest properly, and I was busy for some minutes saying hello around. So busy that I didn't really notice, until I climbed into one of the superannuated government cars, that none other than Dumpy Scarth was occupying a seat alongside the Captain.

"Hi, Dumpy," I greeted the fat, moon-faced little flyer. "No doubt you flew all the way from Laredo just to make the home-coming complete."

"The hell he did," grunted Kennard. "Three days ago he transferred from the Laredo flight to McMullen."

"He's going to polish off our flying," Sleepy Spears stated gently.

Sleepy's a stocky, somnolent bird who counts any extra effort whatever as so much irretrievable waste of energy. Possibly because of the amount of rest he gets, whenever an emergency comes up he's the fastest, toughest, keenest bird who ever sat at a stick.

Dumpy Scarth chuckled boyishly, his

homely round face beaming into mine.

"These birds can kid all they want to!" he proclaimed characteristically, "but believe me I made 'em sit up and take notice when I got a shot at the new S. E. 5 you've got out there! Ask 'em about that upside down roll—"

"God help us," I interrupted prayerfully. "Listen, Dumpy. I have many matters of import on my mind, such as one of the old tequila cocktails, telling the story of my life, and playing a real hand of poker again. The first time you start telling how good you are, I'm going to bind and gag you and ease you into temporary incarceration."

"Huh!" sniffed Dumpy. "Fat chance anybody'll have to talk about anything, now that you're back!"

FAR be it from me to deny that at times I am loquacious, and easy to urge into speech. However, I received this last shot of Dumpy's in dignified silence, which enables me to make you acquainted with him.

Physically he's short and fat and fleshy-faced with a nice boyish pair of eyes which are easy to make flash and crackle with excited, almost-hysterical feeling. And the little squirt was unquestionably the most conceited flyer who ever set his feet against a rudder bar and risked his neck to give some spectator a thrill. Dumpy informed the world at the slightest provocation that he was, without question, the best flyer who ever oozed through the ozone.

And the heck of it was that he came pretty close to being just what he thought he was! There's where the rub came.

Furthermore, flying was the only thing discernible about which he had any illusions. He wasn't over twenty-four or five, had had sort of a tough life in his early days, and being a flying officer was paradise to him. He wouldn't have swapped his job to be a general on the ground. Flying and the army were the ends of existence to him. I think he woke up in the morning and patted himself on the back as he told himself that he was Dumpy Scarth, army pilot. And his waking hours were spent in a continuous endeavor to fly more—and more skillfully. Along with that, to show off so that any lingering doubts the world might have about his ability would be stilled. He'd slap St. Peter in the nose from his ship any day in the week, for applause, and did. There's no doubt at all in my mind that he was, in front of a crowd, the craziest, most daring, and almost as skillful an airman as ever made a landing.

And how he talked, about flying, I mean. Any other flyer who accomplished anything Dumpy became jealous of, belittling the achievement while he mourned the fact that he hadn't had a chance to get that publicity himself. He was perfectly willing to try any stunt, trip, maneuver or test which any man in the world would—and could come as close to being successful. He spent his time thinking up new records to make, stunts to do, grandstand flying to accomplish. If he should be over the Atlantic Ocean, with just precisely enough gas to get him to shore, he'd stop above a rowboat with one man in it and stunt until the gas gave out. One onlooker was a crowd to him—twenty spectators turned him into an aerial demon who'd make a statue quiver like a shimmy dancer.

BUT, as I said, flying was his only vice, unless you include a grandstand tendency in most of his public appearances. Otherwise he was a lovable, impulsive, excitable youngster who could tickle any stringed instrument with skill, warble a million songs—most of them dirty—in a charming barroom tenor, and was good humored and popular despite his complex. He had a hide like an armor plate, and simply couldn't be kidded or shamed out of his free and easy bragging. Insults, suggestions, and razzings rolled off him like spitballs off the sides of a battleship, and as soon as he could get the floor again he'd resume where he left off.

And never forget that before-mentioned fact—he could make good on everything he said! That's what made things so bad.

"How did you happen to come to McMullen, and leave Laredo flat?" I inquired. "Did they get to the point where a field ordinance required you to be muzzled?"

"Nope," grinned Dumpy serenely. "You lucky stiffs up here always have fallen into more excitement than any other outfit along the river. I wanted to be in on it. Gosh! The newspaper space you've hogged for five years would—"

"Cause Dumpy Scarth to blow up and bust if it continued without him in on it," Jimmy Jennings interjected.

He's a slim, handsome youngster who was an ace in the war and as good a flyer as they come. In fact, the entire border patrol, if I do say it myself, was selected from the veterans of the service. Getting into the tiny clearings which dot the desert of mesquite we have to fly over is no job for an amateur.

How I got into the patrol I don't know. Just luck, I presume, which was what got a country boll-buster from the wilds of Utah into the Air Service in the first place. My entire stay in college was limited to a two-hour sightseeing tour at the University of Texas.

"Any other new men in the fold?" I asked stocky, scarred-faced Captain Kennard:

Incidentally, that same square, deep-voiced, spike-pompadoured little Captain was the best C. O. along the border. He'd got three planes and a flock of medals with the assorted palms, leaves and pineapples which governments pass out during the war. Having been a civil engineer over half the known world, he had just the right combination to handle a bunch of flying prima donnas—one of the boys most of the time, and a damn good disciplinarian when necessary. I say that in heartfelt sincerity, having been disciplined at one time or another.

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SLEEPY SPEARS' heavy eyelids raised a trifle as I asked my question. We had left the crowded main street of McMullen, and were fogging and fanning along through the Mexican quarter, about half-way to the field.

"Didst ever hear of Lieutenant Percival Enoch O'Reilly?" he inquired mildly.

"Don't tell me he's one of us!" was my explosion.

"About to be, this very day. In fact, unless Pete Miller came in cock-eyed from the eastern patrol, the ship that passed over a few minutes ago contained Percival Enoch," the Captain corroborated. "Know him?"

"No, but I know a lot about him," I stated.

"That's the fix everybody's in. He's just back from the Philippines." Jimmy Jennings told me.

"I haven't found any reason why he should be so well-known," snorted Dumpy Scarth. "What's he ever done? Gosh! You'd think he was a combination of Gueynemer and Fonk and Von Richtofen and Rickenbacker to hear all the chatter! Why, a lot of kid stunts—"

"Oh, dry up, Dumpy," the Captain told him elegantly. "Strikes me that we've got another playboy around the joint. Thank God you left Tex MacDowell up at Cook Field, Slim."

"I never shall forget the yarn they tell about Percival's adventures that time martial law was declared in West Virginia and he was sent over with a load of bombs," chuckled Jennings. "Had a forced landing in a town where the people were hostile, faked martial law to protect himself, and ran that town for thirteen days like it never was run before! They said he had a curfew law, requisitioned the traffic cop's motor-cycle as his private car, and spent half his time with the moonshiners in the mountains."

"Jim Reade just wrote me a while back from the Islands," grinned Kennard, "that another of his forced landings got him into the midst of a tribe of unfriendly Moros over there. After everybody thought he was dead, he came back a Chief, Jeffe, President, or whatever it is a Moro ruler is."

"Well, I personally know that after the war he got out of the army a while, and was in that Kosciusko squadron in Poland and from there got to be something or other in the Lithuanian cavalry," I told them.

"As a last contribution," drawled Sleepy Spears, "he was, for the period just preceding his reentry into the Air Service, an instructor in the Mexican Air Service down at Mexico City."

"What of it?" shrilled Dumpy, unable to hold himself in any longer. "Any guy that wants to go from pillar to post—"

"Nothing, my boy," rasped the Captain as he avoided a Mexican mutt in the street by an eyelash. "What caused you to sit up and howl whenever his name is mentioned?"

"Oh—all this chatter makes me sick," growled Dumpy.

Whereat we enjoyed a community grin. Dumpy felt that somebody was arriving who might compete with him for the attention of the Air Service in general, the border and McMullen in particular, and the luscious young ladies thereof individually.

I'll tell you the truth. One Slimuel X. Evans looked forward with considerable relish to setting eyes on this bozo O'Reilly.

HIS career in the Air Service had furnished about as many anecdotes as George Washington's naps have genuine antiques. Some of his escapades were unprintable—all of them funny. Along the western front in France he'd seen active service for exactly six months. In that time he'd never missed a chance to hop any number of Boche. He made five trips across the lines in that six months. Every time he got at least one German official, and each time he got shot up and rested in a hospital. He generated a plan to fly a captured ship over the lines and capture the Kaiser, but that was officially doused. He'd have tried it if they'd let him. And they did whisper the fact about that he'd caught a Kiwi colonel alone one time, said colonel being as popular, deservedly, as the Kaiser himself at the time, and that said colonel didn't appear publicly thereafter for a week. He'd been court-martialed, had Percival, on an average of three times a year during his service, and never convicted because the members of the court martial were too weak from laughing at the testimony to vote.

In a minute the airdrome was in sight, sweltering in the blazing mid-afternoon sun. It was like coming back into my own room. Buildings on the southern side, the little individual tents for the officers beyond them, great black corrugated iron hangars flanking the airdrome to east and west, and the yellow sandy field stretching northward to the low fence which bounded it there. The guards saluted with wide grins, the radio sergeant gestured at me jovially, the mechanics working on the one big De Haviland on the line waved wrenches in greeting, and I felt like a million dollars, except that I was tired. Had I known what the night was to bring forth, I'd have taken a nap.

"Percival is here," announced Jimmy as we hauled to in front of headquarters with a flourish and a loud backfire. "That's not the patrol ship."

As we climbed out and went up the steps a man's figure appeared in the doorway.

"Lieutenant O'Reilly reporting for duty, Cap'n!" said a large and hearty voice—and five khaki-clad flyers, including me, turned into statues—if there are any sculped with their mouths open.

So this was Percival Enoch O'Reilly! I remember thinking in total amazement.

For the man in the doorway wasn't an inch over five feet two. In fact, he barely escaped being a dwarf, as far as height went. But what there was of him was sturdy—powerfully sturdy. His short legs, encased in highly polished boots and perfectly fitting breeches, were straight and round and thick. He stood with them well apart, as though planted there for an expected onslaught. Going north, his torso seemed to be poured into his brand new roll-collared blouse. His body was barrel-like, merging into sloping, massive shoulders. Possibly it was because his clothes fitted so tightly that I got the idea that his flesh was hard as rock.

It was his face that turned our goofy looking countenances into grinning masks of welcome, however. Percival Enoch removed his cap after saluting, and shook hands with Kennard as the rest of us inspected him.

His hair, slightly curly and close-clipped, was as red as a burlesque show comedian's nose. Forthright, fiery, flaming red. It was parted exactly in the middle, and slicked down. His eyebrows had faded from much sunlight, and were light streaks across a lineless skin which had been tanned into leather. Red hair and white eyebrows and twinkling blue eyes aren't ordinarily met with in connection with sunburn like that, and it sure was a startling effect.

His short nose, which had been broken, tilted a bit above a tiny little waxed mustache which was also bleached into blondness. His mouth—full of large white teeth—was rather small—almost effeminate. But an angular jaw gave the lie to that.

He seemed to twinkle like an elf, from eyes and mouth and hair. Probably it was the effect of the sunlight on his various hirsute appurtenances, and a certain bristling effect obvious in his eyebrows and that absurd mustache.

"Hello, everybody!" he went on as he shook hands around. He could barely get his short fingers half-way around my own oversized paw, but he purchased enough for a grip which would have done credit to a strong man.

And that deep-booming voice of his! Coming from that toy body, it was as surprising as hearing a fog-horn effect from a tin whistle. He fairly crackled with vitality, joviality and cussedness, if you get what I mean. Satan himself, in convivial mood, peeped out of those sparkling eyes.

"I can pick you out pretty closely," he stated as he made the rounds. "Been hearing a lot about you boys. You're Jimmy Jennings, eh? And this must be Sleepy Spears, eh? Ho, ho, ho! And according to the dope, the tallest man in the Air Service is Slim Evans, but I thought you were a test pilot at Cook?"

"Just got here on temporary duty," I told him. "I find I left here short a few thousand tools, and what not."

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared. "I was that way trying to clear the Philippines. Had all my sergeants out stealing from the other outfits for two weeks. Then Billy Rider came down and cracked his ship all to pieces in a lake, and according to the survey I put through he had had two hundred wrenches, four typewriters, three dozen flying suits and five Liberty motors in his ship.

"I don't believe I can call your name, at that!" he went on, just the touch of an Irish brogue in his voice as he shook hands with the lowering Scarth.

"My name's Robert Scarth—sometimes called Dumpy," stated that young gentleman pompously.

His impressive announcement was calculated to recall to the newcomer's mind the many exploits which had made Dumpy famous—he thought.

"Well, glad to know you!" grinned O'Reilly. "Haven't been on the border long, eh?"

"Huh?" exploded Dumpy furiously. "F—four years! Why, I'm the guy that brought down those——"

"My error!" O'Reilly assured him airily. "This all the gang?"

"No—the two patrol ships aren't in yet, but the western one ought to be," Kennard told him. "I—"

"Telephone, Captain!" came the voice of Pop Cravath, our bald-headed and fiery adjutant. "Long distance. Lo, Slim! So you're back, eh? God help us all!"

WHILE Pop and I were chinning I permitted myself a few grins at the sorely insulted Scarth. That he alone, of all the flyers, was unknown to the newcomer had put the final seal on his advance dislike of O'Reilly. He was now engaged in giving Percival Enoch a running summary of his border achievements, in a highly patronizing and self-satisfied manner. Dumpy was as naive as a child where flying was concerned. O'Reilly, several inches shorter than the far from lofty Scarth, was peering up into the cocky border man's face with an air of delighted surprise. Those light eyebrows were raised quizzically, and his eyes were mere slits. Finally, when Dumpy took breath, O'Reilly sighed:

"My, my!"

Ordinarily this would have glanced off Dumpy's skin like birdshot off a boulder. But now he bridled.

"And on the border we don't throw the bull," he snapped.

"I'd never have believed it!" stated O'Reilly. "I—"

"Listen here!" blazed Dumpy. "New men don't get away with—"

"Listen, Cocky, yourself," roared O'Reilly jovially. "Did anybody ever tell you you talked too much?"

Silence, so thick you could have carted it away in chunks. Dumpy, his face flaming, his lips moving soundlessly as he groped for words, was a fat hunk of helpless rage.

"News, boys."

It was the Captain's raucous voice. One look at that square, battered face of his in the doorway, and I sensed tragedy.

"BERT GATES' ship was found fifty miles west, nearly burned up, Gates dead with a bashed in skull and pretty well unrecognizable. Sergeant Baker, with him when he left, wasn't in the ship—and can't be found, and it all sounds phony to me!"

In the interval of absolute silence which fell over us it seemed to me that the old spirit of the border rushed over me in a wave. I forgot that I was returning after months of absence—I felt that I had never left at all. The old days, when any passing moment might bring forth a tragedy such as this one, were with me again, and my mind just automatically felt its way on to the implications in the Captain's words.

Bert Gates was just a name to me, I didn't know him, and he had joined the flight after my departure. Despite the lack of personal grief, though, there was the fiercely bitter resentment which arises in every flyer's heart when one of the boys goes west.

Added to that was my instinctive feeling that Gates had been helped on his way out of this life. His observer was not in the ship, and could not be found. That was as peculiar a situation as could well be imagined.

"Who reported it?" I asked the Captain—the first words to break the silence.

"Chap named Gray. Said he'd bought the old Griffin place a couple of months ago. He saw the ship start down, apparently all right. It crashed in an open field about a mile north of Gray's house," barked the Captain. "Gray started right over—couldn't remember hearing any crash—and found the wreck. The Sergeant must have seen Gray's house before the landing—if he was unhurt he'd naturally have made for that house."

The other flyers said not a word. Grim-faced, I could fairly see their thoughts. Many a time a ship came back from patrol with bullet holes in it, and many were the men from El Paso to Brownsville who'd give much for the pelt of any border patrolman. Occasionally they succeeded. When that happened the flying clan did not like it. In fact, they never forgot it. It welded them into a coherent group of men with one idea—to make it distinctly unhealthy for the man or men who'd broken their ranks.

Remember, by any chance, the system of the old Texas Rangers? Many a lone ranger dominated a situation which had baffled a dozen ordinary minions of the law, and did it without so much as a bruise to show for his trouble. That was because when a ranger rode down the street of a wild town no outlaw was able to pull a trigger on him without deep thought. Said gunman could kill that ranger—but what would the other rangers do to him when they heard about it?

The answer was "get him." Get him if it took the whole gang of them a year, or carried one of them half way across the earth. There was but one end to the trail.

And that is the spirit of the Air Service—and particularly the spirit of the border. Later, perhaps, you may see that more clearly.

Dumpy's eyes were ablaze, but for once his tongue was still. Then my eyes roved to O'Reilly, while the Captain paced the veranda with choppy strides.

Somehow O'Reilly's whole face seemed to have changed. His merry blue eyes were now round little pieces of glass, glinting as coldly as sunlight off an iceberg. His small mouth was thinned to almost nothing, and the skin appeared to have tightened over his jaw. Tiny little white scars seemed to leap into being here and there on his face, and for the first time I noticed that there was a slight bulge on one side of his jaw. Somehow, at that moment, his face seemed battered, if you get what I mean—the countenance of a man who had been knocked around, physically and mentally, a good deal. He'd aged, to the casual eye, ten years in one minute.

"Captain, let me fly down and see what's happened!" exploded Dumpy. "I haven't flown much today, and I'll ferret out—"

"I've got a better idea," I cut him off. "Cap'n, how about me breaking in right now? You boys have all flown a good deal today, and I've been riding a train."

Kennard did not hesitate.

"Two ships will go," he said tersely. "Dumpy, you can go in one ship, alone, and bring back Gates' body. Slim, you stay around and see whether you can pick up anything of interest. I——"

"Captain Kennard!"

It was O'Reilly's fog-horn voice. The sturdy little flyer was straight as a ramrod, his cold eyes dancing up into Kennard's.

"I sure would like to go with Evans, sir," he said in clipped phrases.

His consuming desire to be in the thick of things made him seem like a ball of fire. The vitality of the man shone through the outward semblance and his deadly seriousness.

"Huh!" snorted Dumpy. "Why send a man who's never been on the border before and doesn't know what it's all about! You flatter yourself——"

"Shut up, you!"

O'Reilly had whirled on Dumpy like a banty rooster in a rage. His red head was thrust forward, and his face was bleak and cruel.

And Dumpy Scarth sort of stepped back a little, and tried to fumble for words. It was as though some withering flame had shot out at him from the amazing little Irishman.

"Furthermore," O'Reilly said slowly. "Don't ever pick me out for any more remarks, see?"

The words were very ordinary, but the effect of them was magical. Dumpy, red as fire and sullen-eyed, did not even bluster. He just quit trying to talk.

Kennard flashed a look at the discom fited, raging Scarth, and even circumstances such as we were involved in could not keep him from the hint of a smile.

"All right, O'Reilly. Get your stuff, all of you. Jimmy, have the ships warmed."

"I fly the ship," I told O'Reilly.

"What do I care?" he spat back at me. Then his face widened in a winter, wolfish sort of grin.

"Think Gates was tampered with?" he demanded.

I nodded.

"Means action, eh? Got here just in the nick of time, didn't we? Ho, ho, ho!"

And he was off for his tent, his short, thick legs covering the ground with amazing speed. His body seemed to fairly skim along the sand.

A MOMENT later we were on the line. Dumpy was already in his ship, warming it himself, while a sergeant was in the cockpit of mine. I relieved him, took a look at the instruments, saw that the temperature had crawled up over sixty, centigrade, and started the final test. With a mechanic on each wingtip straining backward against the ship, and another man sitting on the tail to keep it from raising in the terrific propeller blast, I eased the throttle forward until the four hundred and fifty horse-power Liberty was singing at sixteen hundred and fifty revolutions a minute and the whirring prop was sending a swirling column of sand high into the air. Air pressure three, oil pressure twenty-five, battery charging rate two, temperature close to eighty—all was well. I ran the motor on each switch of the double ignition system separately, and there was not a miss. As I eased the throttle back Percival Enoch, looking like a brownie in his coveralls and helmet and goggles, was climbing in the rear seat. We had our Colts, there was plenty of ammunition for both front and rear guns, and everything was set.

Dumpy was already taking off as our mechanics pulled the wheelblocks from beneath the wheels. By the time I'd swung the ship and was taxying for the northern end of the field Dumpy was in the air. A terrific grandstand zoom took him over the buildings at the southern end of the airdrome, and then he banked sharply westward. He disappeared on a bee-line for our objective, scarcely a hundred feet high.

"He wants to get there as far in advance of us as possible, so he'll be alone in his glory before whatever crowd there is," I remember telling myself disgustedly.

As a matter of fact he should have waited for us, and the ships flown together in case of a forced landing on the part of either. But Dumpy wanted a few minutes of solo strutting.

That all sounds nasty, I admit, but don't get me too far wrong. Dumpy felt as badly as any one about the tragedy, and would risk his life in a second to get revenge. But he was just constitutionally unable to forget himself, no matter what the circumstances.

FOR the next half hour the familiar panorama of the border unfolded itself before my reminiscent eyes. To the north the limitless sea of rolling mesquite which met the horizon twenty miles away; southward the twisting Rio Grande and the daily brooding chaparral of Mexico. Directly beneath us a few ribbon roads, some shacks, an occasional house, a few fields. And we were flying directly into a red sun which was only half visible above the horizon. It would not be very long before the quick Texas darkness was upon us.

I was keeping a sharp watch below, just out of habit. I looked around, and beheld O'Reilly with his helmeted head over the side of the ship, watching the ground uninterruptedly. He was so short he had to stand to get any sort of a reasonable view.

I knew the Griffin place. It consisted of a comfortable bungalow, and about a hundred acres of land, part of it under cultivation in cotton. Gray was a new name to me, doubtless a newcomer to the border. The place was a half mile or so from the river, bounded by mesquite on all but the southern side.

In exactly half an hour, my ostrich-like neck stretched to its limit and my eyes ranging the ground ahead of me, I picked up a ship on the ground. A few seconds later I saw the wreck. And there were only four people around it. Dumpy had not found much of a crowd.

With growing interest I surveyed that field as I came closer. It was fully three hundred yards square, plowed and planted. The ridges, though, were very small. In other words, it looked like a field where any kind of a flyer at all could make a safe landing.

And Gates' ship had burned. That meant it had crashed—not just nosed up in landing. The fact that his skull was crushed made a crash a certainty. And if I remembered correctly—

"Hold your horses, and get the dope straight from headquarters," I admonished myself when I found that I was counting an awful lot of chickens without many eggs.

I swooped down over the field, and circled it to look it over from a hundred feet. Landing was a cinch, unless the earth was softer than it looked to be. Three horses stood at the side of the field. And one of the three people who were standing close to the blackened wreck of Gates' plane, unless my eyes deceived me most atrociously, was a woman.

Southward a mile or so was the Gray bungalow, corral, and three sheds. The mesquite started at the edge of that field, and continued uninterruptedly as far as one's good eye could see.

There were no other habitations for man or beast, aside from the Gray place, within eight or ten miles.

I circled around a few hundred yards west of the field, and cut the throttle gradually, skimming the mesquite to stall into the soft plowed ground. The nose of my ship tipped downward a little as the wheels sank into the loam, but in general the landing was a simple one.

O'REILLY said, as we started for the wreck:

"There's a woman there. Seems a little funny she should want to be around a corpse for this length of time, eh? She must be used to 'em."

"If she's a border girl, she probably is," I told him.

But there was no corpse. Gates' body had been removed from the blackened débris. One other thing I noticed immediately. That was that the motor had not buried itself in the ground at all. The tail of the ship—or what had been the tail—had been thrust into the air, as though the ship had simply nosed up.

One item of information was a dead cinch. That DeHaviland had not spun into the ground.

I pointed this out to O'Reilly in low tones as we neared the silent, waiting group.

"And even a DeHaviland," he said in a gruff stage whisper, "doesn't often catch on fire in a noseup. To say nothing of there being few flyers butter-fingered enough to have nosed up this field!"

"Where's Gates' body?" I demanded of Dumpy, who walked forward to meet us.

"They'd already got it out," he told me. "It's on the way to the undertaker's in Gray's car, he said. Took it to Pola Lasa."

That was a village about twenty miles away.

"I wish they hadn't done that," I said in a whisper.

"Here's Gray now," Dumpy told us, and my eyes riveted themselves on the face of the tall young fellow who had come forward. The other two were nearly a hundred feet away, by the wreck.

He was a very prepossessing individual. Dressed in expensive riding clothes and bootees, his tan silk shirt open at the neck, and a Stetson which hadn't cost a cent less than fifty dollars cocked back a bit on his head, he looked more or less like a motion picture cowboy. His thin, lean face was fairly well tanned, and a pair of big black eyes met mine unwaveringly. Deep lines from nostrils to mouth strengthened his countenance, somehow, and there was a deep flush on his cheeks.

When Dumpy introduced us his grip was quick, strong, and nervous.

"And this is O'Reilly—a rookie on the border," Dumpy spat forth when he introduced O'Reilly. "He just came for the ride."

There was no doubt that Scarth had it in for O'Reilly in a very thoroughgoing manner. The Irishman shot a contemptuous glance at Dumpy, and then shook hands.

"You're the guy that reported this?" he asked abruptly.

Gray nodded, his handsome face seeming drawn and haggard, now that I looked at it more closely. He seemed to be under a terrific nervous strain.

"What happened?" boomed O'Reilly, and his cool eyes were like pin-points, boring into the full dark ones of Gray.

"We saw the ship circling down over this field," Gray said slowly, and I noticed that his speech was that of an educated, cultured man. It had no trace of the southern dialect in it.

"It didn't seem to be having a forced landing, or to have anything wrong with it.

In fact, as far as I could judge it made a normal glide for landing, up to the time it disappeared from sight. The next minute I saw smoke coming up above the trees, rushed over, and found things just as you see, except that the flyer's body was in the flames. And his skull was badly crushed. As soon as I had telephoned, we came back and got the body out and sent it in my car to Pola Lasa. I—"

HE STOPPED himself abruptly, his shadowed eyes darting from face to face.

He had been on the verge of saying something, and had apparently thought better of it. I was becoming more and more speculative regarding one Mr. Gerald Gray's nervous condition.

"Spit it out!"

It was O'Reilly. Short legs wide apart, the battered little flyer was a bundle of concentrated energy battering at the doors of Gray's mind. His head was thrust slightly forward above his wide shoulders, and his whole attitude was one of bullying the stranger before us.

"Why, what?" Gray asked surprisedly.

"You started to say something, I thought," O'Reilly informed him in that deep voice. "Well, Mr. Gray, while we're alone there are two or three points which might as well be mentioned."

O'Reilly took me off my feet, and I'll swear I didn't know what to do. Here he was taking charge of things—and apparently wasting no time whatever in subtleties, as it were.

And I let him go. If ever competence and audacious ability to take care of himself shone through the earthly body of a man it did in "Penoch", which was to be his border nickname.

"In the first place," boomed O'Reilly, "this fire's unnatural. In the second, the wreck's damn unnatural. In the third, the disappearance of the observer in this ship is —— damn unnatural. And we aim to find out some more about it—and we aim to find it out from you!"

In a second such tensity fell over that little group as I've never felt before or since—and that includes looking into guns, too. Gray, without the shadow of a doubt, was a man writhing in torture. His face was strained and white, his eyes pools of misery. And little Penoch O'Reilly, mustache bristling, eyes glinting, leaning forward pugnaciously while his loud voice battered away at Gray's defenses was like some human projectile. There was something so hard and sort of inevitable about him that it seemed to me that no defense, mental or physical, could stand against him.

Queer feeling to have about a sawed-off, scarred-face little squirt whose head didn't come to your chest, wasn't it?

My eyes were frozen so tightly to Gray's anguished face that I failed to notice the approach of the girl and the other man. I think that Dumpy did, though. After a moment of pregnant silence wherein it seemed that O'Reilly's will was battling with Gray's, Dumpy's voice split the stillness.

"Oh, why all this stuff, O'Reilly? Mr. Gray, this fellow here just got on the border today, and doesn't know what it's all about. Don't mind what he says, necessarily."

O'Reilly turned his head, and just shot one look at the round face of his antagonist. Dumpy's eyes were blazing defiantly. And O'Reilly's face gradually got purple. Not a word did he say, but his body sort of quivered, and his fists were clenched so tightly that the knuckles were white and there were deep depressions where the nails bit in.

Before a word more could be said Dumpy had turned toward the girl, and there was a world of bravado and self-satisfaction in his voice as he said:

"We were just coming over, Miss Gray. We got talking business all of a sudden, for no reason. May I present Slim Evans, an old border flyer who just got back to McMullen?"

KNOWING Dumpy as I did, I knew the why of his inexcusable challenge to O'Reilly as accurately as though I'd read his mind. It was Dumpy's habit to fall for any presentable woman immediately, in the first place. And in the second place, he liked to grandstand under any conditions. He'd seen his chance to make himself big—and to ingratiate himself with Gray.

Penoch O'Reilly started to get control of himself, under the triumphant eyes of Scarth, as we bowed to the girl. And both of us forgot, momentarily, what was transpiring between her brother and ourselves.

Let me get hold of myself before I rave, or you'll think I'm worse off than Dumpy where the speaker sex is concerned. No one knows better than I that good-looking girls grow on every bush—but knockouts sprout about as often as banana trees do in Labrador. Outside of the ecstatic descriptions of writers, and the idealized conceptions of the bozos who illustrate their vaporings, the perfect beauty is practically extinct, to my mind.

So when I say that this Ann Gray was the best-looking thing I've ever seen in my thirty-odd years of life, it means something. If she wasn't a knockout, I'm not six-feet-six, thin as a rail, and homelier than any man has a right to be. All of which I am.

She had everything. By that I mean more than a pair of gorgeous eyes, and a straight little nose, and a heavy mass of black hair, and all the rest of the things which go to make up prepossessing pans. Add to those outward things a personality that sparkled in her big dark eyes and was apparent even in the trembly, troubled sort of smile she threw us, and you've got what I call attractiveness. Her slim body, in riding clothes, was drawn straight and stiff as a ramrod when she greeted us, and her eyes were shadowed as they shifted from us to her brother's face.

BEING one of these misfit physical specimens, and knowing very well that whatever virtues I may have are safely hidden behind my nose as far as women are concerned, I never am tempted to kid myself about making any favorable impressions on them. And when that happens, you become, to a certain extent, anesthetic to the charms of fair sirens. Consequently, my impersonal admiration of the young lady was not such as to blind me to certain obvious facts.

One was that she, like her brother, was laboring under a tremendous strain. She was biting her lips now and then, and her oval face, delicately tanned, showed it plainly.

Under different conditions I'd have permitted myself a mild ha ha at Penoch O'Reilly. He growled a short "Good afternoon," to her, as though she'd been a Mexican hag, and then his eyes returned to their silent attack on Gray. As far as he was concerned, the injection of woman interest meant not a thing.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" she asked, and the words seemed to be dragged reluctantly from her. Her voice was a sort of contralto, very low and musical.

"The officers think that this—tragedy—did not happen naturally," he said slowly, and their eyes met as though in full understanding.

She took a step toward him, the rest of us scarcely breathing, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Listen, now," came Dumpy's raucous tones with considerable blatancy, "no use of getting all wrought up over this, Miss Gray. Now we border patrolmen—"

"Shut up!" I yapped at him, and he did close his mouth momentarily. From surprise, I suspect.

The Grays seemed not to have noticed the interruption.

"Why don't you tell them, Jerry?" she asked him.

Penoch O'Reilly's breath was released in a long sigh, and his barrel-like little body relaxed. He felt that he'd won.

The tall stranger shrugged his shoulders wearily, as though shaking a burden from them.

"I will," he said quietly. "Pete, ride one horse and lead the others. We'll walk."

PETE was the roughly dressed, weazened old fellow who had been hanging back of the group a few feet. He was evidently an employee of the Grays. Without a word he made off with awkward, bowlegged strides.

It struck me as being high time for one Slimuel X. Evans to be taking a hand. So I broke into speech as follows:

"This is all very mysterious, so to speak. Mr. Gray, you'll excuse me for saying that we have no reason to trust you. Where are we going to walk to hear your story?"

"To the house, if you will," he said with a faint smile on his aristocratic face.

I say aristocratic, because that's the way it impressed me. As a matter of fact, I hadn't got a good look at it, in detail. That huge hat shaded it pretty thoroughly, and now the light was failing. All I had up to that time was an impression of a lean, aquiline countenance from which a pair of very dark eyes looked fearlessly at the world.

He glanced at the sky now, and went on:

"You'll spend the night with us, of course. If you don't agree now, I think you will after I tell you a few things."

"All that adds to our suspense," I informed him. "However, as you will. I'll report by telephone. But get this. We're convinced that there's been foul play here. The disappearance of Baker, the sergeant, is an additional mystery. He must be within twenty miles of here—that's as far as he could have gotten, on horseback. Does your story throw any light on his disappearance?"

"Not necessarily," Gray said steadily. "If it does—there's no use of looking for him now."

What he said, plus the fact that it would be pitch dark in a few minutes, sounded reasonable to me. So I said the last stanza of my piece.

"Reminding you again that we have no reason to trust, I'll simply go on to say that we'll accept your hospitality, temporarily and with reservations. But there are three Colt six-shooters here, and any one of 'em will bark quick and sudden if we're suspicious. Personally I don't think that there's anything of an ulterior nature in your mind—but down here you must realize that we can't trust anybody. So watch your step, eh?"

He really grinned then—I could see his white teeth flash.

"I thoroughly comprehend your point," he said with an intonation and a bow right out of a Back Bay drawing-room. "But it's a bit of a long story not easy for me to tell, I think we're all very tired, and the house seems most sensible, doesn't it?"

"It does," I agreed. "But for —— sake let's get there pronto, eh?"

"Amen," echoed O'Reilly with deep bass emphasis—and surprisingly, the girl laughed with such frank enjoyment that Penoch, when his eyes met hers, grinned himself.

"Sounded like I'd had training as a Methodist deacon, didn't it?" he queried. "Well as a matter of fact, I have. Ho, ho, ho!"

THE GRAYS walked ahead, in deep conversation, while we brought up the rear, a hundred feet or so behind them. The swift Texas twilight was merging into darkness already.

"O'Reilly," I remarked, "I'm not noted for subtlety, nor yet finesse, myself, but I've got to hand it to you for nailing Gray to the cross in jig time. You figured the lay, and sure acted fast."

"Why wait around?" he enquired jovially. "Say, looks as though we might find some excitement, eh?"

"It does. The really puzzling thing is the matter of this sergeant's disappearance," I returned. "There are several dozen conceivable reasons for a border patrolman getting into trouble on the ground. But having his companion disappear is another matter altogether."

Here Dumpy, his vanity still smarting, took a hand.

"Strikes me," he proclaimed savagely, "as though a range of mountain was being made out of one molehill. Foul play—all right. But overstraining to connect the Grays with it——"

"Listen, you," roared O'Reilly, but this time he did not seem wrathful. He spoke with entire lack of passion, as though passing the time of day. Feet wide apart, he planted himself directly in front of Dumpy.

"There's a little matter of unfinished business I want to notify you of," he pursued, his eyes shining like a cat's in the dark. "You talk too damn much, and you're a complete and total fool. Furthermore, you've directed too much of your chatter at me. Just as soon as our minds are clear, so to speak, and we get this business straightened up, I'm going to take you out and lick the eternal daylights out of you for two reasons. One to show you I can do it, and the other to give me a talking point so that I can shut you up whenever I please!"

"Don't wait!" flashed Scarth, and his open hand cracked against O'Reilly's cheek.

"Just another item proving that you're a damn fool instead of just an ordinary one," O'Reilly told him calmly. He did not offer to resent the slap at all. "We'll wait until more important business is over before we have out little set-to."

"Listen, both of you!" I interjected in no uncertain tones. "This stuff is out—get me? O'Reilly, hold your tongue. As for you, Dumpy——"

"Wait a minute," O'Reilly interrupted raucously, and his twinkling face was turned up to meet my eyes, a foot and a half above him. "Slim, you're all right and a good guy—but don't tell me what to do in that tone of voice. See? I know your point as well as you do, and I don't need to be told. Come on—let's go."

We followed him automatically, Dumpy

still incoherent with wrath. Mr. Percival Enoch O'Reilly, striding along with ludicrously long strides, went on talking as though nothing had happened.

"Of course," he said calmly, "Dumpy here's fallen for the skirt, hook, line and sinker. That, added to his natural boneheadedness and—er—egotistic loquaciousness, that is a flossy phrase, has turned him into a hard guy to keep down."

"And I don't blame you, caballero. She's one of the most elegant women I've ever seen, if not more so. So much so that I'm interested myself. You've got a rival, Dumpy, don't forget that."

Suddenly he grinned, and pushed his helmet back further on his head. "Gosh, I hope she turns out to be wrong some way, or I swear I might get hooked!"

The conversation switched, at my suggestion, to the problems connected with official business, but when we arrived at the house we'd come to no particular conclusions. I remember, as we came into the clearing and saw the lights gleaming through the purple darkness, that I drew in my breath and admitted something to myself.

"It's hot and dusty and deserted, afflicted with tarantulas and divers snakes, Spigs, and assorted bugs, but there'll never be another strip of country to take the place of this one, for me!"

Perhaps anticipation of what lay ahead was responsible for part of my sentimentality, but that's another advantage of the border. Something's almost always just ahead, whether you know it or not.

We went into the fairly sizeable bungalow, and the red-faced Dumpy, the hard-boiled O'Reilly, and the simple Slim Evans all took a minute or so to register surprise. For the sitting-room which we entered directly from the porch might have been transplanted entire from some luxurious city home. There were standing lamps, and a reproducing piano which hadn't cost a cent less than fifteen hundred berries, oriental rugs, several paintings—mostly western landscapes—a davenport set which looked thickly enough upholstered to smother a careless sitter, and other items of comfort. It was cosy and rich and restful and all the rest of it.

O'Reilly, bleached eyebrows and mustache like bristling points of light, took his favorite stance, looked the place over in detail, and then stated:

"Some joint, Gray, some joint! In fact, I haven't set foot in a private home of any kind for several years, so this knocks me dead. I presume your sister is responsible. Congratulations, sis!"

Once again she laughed. This time she threw back her head and let it roll forth uninterruptedly. Dumpy threw a savagely disgusted look at the forthright Penoch, and said sourly:

"You mustn't mind him, Miss Gray."

"Mind him! He's delightful!" chuckled the girl, and then she looked at her brother. That sobered her, abruptly.

WITH his hat off he was one good-looking chap. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Gray had had a good-looking crop of kids, it appeared. His hair was as black as his sister's, and almost as thick, and waved a little. He looked a typical movie hero type, except for one thing. There were signs of maturity and character there—as though he'd seen things, and been through trouble in his life, and knew, in general, what it was all about. His mouth was a bit thin and repressed, the lines a little deep, his eyes brooding—and he was going through an ordeal, right then.

His sister, too, showed a few things in the light, without her hat. In fact, she went out of the class of just a good-looking girl, right then. She, too, had character and maturity in a face that otherwise might have been the beauty of a simon pure dumb-bell. I changed my estimate of her age from twenty to around twenty-four.

"Sit down, please," she asked us.

Grimy, covered with oil, and in faded khaki as we were, I almost hated to occupy one of those chairs, but we did. Dumpy planted himself on the divan, close to the girl, who smiled at him generously. Her brother, whom she'd called Jerry, remained standing, as did O'Reilly. And Penoch was serious, his greenish blue eyes boring uncomfortably into Gray's. The two of them generated a certain tensity which fairly throbbed through the silence.

"Shoot!" exploded O'Reilly—and as he leaned forward he was like an accusing statue.

"I will," nodded Gray. "In the first place, I prefer that you know who we are. Then you can make full investigation, by wire. It may add weight to what I have to say. My half-sister, Ann, and I have lived in California for years. We are originally English. We had a little money, settled in Hollywood, and finally, more or less for a lark, she went into the movies and was fairly successful. Two years ago I made considerable money in the California Oil Fields. However, we went a little wild—too many parties, night-life, and that stuff—and decided that we'd combine business and a search for our partially lost health by coming down here to Texas, far away from our friends, and living here for a year or so, trying the simple life. I intended to dabble in oil in the Texas fields, too.

"However, Gerald Gray is known pretty widely around Hollywood, and any time you desire you can ascertain, by wiring names I give you or officials of your own choice, that I'm supposed to be an ordinarily good citizen.

"I mention these things because it's natural that you officers, right now, wonder who I am, and possibly, whether or not I had any connection with the murder of your friend, or friends."

He stopped, went to a decanter, and tossed off a drink. O'Reilly didn't move a muscle. His head still thrust forward like some belligerent sparrow, he watched Gray unceasingly.

"To resume," Gray went on in his meticulous way, "we bought this place and came down here a couple of months ago. We hadn't been here a week when an old friend of mine dropped in, to my intense surprise. I had no idea he was in this part of the world. His name is Frederich Von Sternberg."

"What?"

It was a surprised bellow from the deep chest of Penoch O'Reilly.

"Know him?" snapped the astonished Gray.

"Go ahead," commanded O'Reilly, his eyes two pools of cold fire. "I'll talk later."

"I'll jump ahead of my story a bit," Gray said with an effort. I'll swear that the telling of his yarn seemed to be literally torturing the man. "Do you know of this Mexican they call the Masked Bandit? Leader of the gang that just held a civil engineer for ransom—and got it?"

"Not me," barked O'Reilly, and I shook my head.

"I do," proclaimed Dumpy, and leaped to his feet. He wanted the center of the stage, now that he could talk. "I'm the only real border man here," he went on happily. "So of course I'd be the only one that knew of him. Listen, you two. This bandit isn't one of the common run of 'em that you all know. This bozo always wears a mask, and so do his men. And he seems to work the American side of the river. Kidnaps considerable, and robs. He's never come close to being caught, and the dope is that some Mexican officials are in cahoots with him. Anyhow, it's a cinch that a bunch of peons across the river like him or are afraid of him, because it's almost impossible to get any information about him. Sort of a Robin Hood proposition, maybe."

"I've found since I've been here that some legendary tales have come up about him," Gray went on. "In Mexico, that is. He's supposed to have got a couple of big pay rolls around the Tampico oil fields, his ransom money has totaled ten thousand dollars, and the other robberies, of cattle principally, have come to considerable more in the last few months. Whether they're all to be laid at the door of the Masked Bandit is open to argument. Anyhow there is such a bandit, with a band of six or eight men, and he's daring and fearless and ruthless—and he'd just as soon tackle a job on the American side of the river as the Mexican. And I've suspected that Von Sternberg was the Masked Bandit!"

Penoch, hands on a table and bent almost double over it, shot his comment through the air like a cannon-ball.

"He's not a Mexican!"

"Of course not. He's a German. But he talks Spanish without the trace of an accent—as he does about a half dozen languages. The mask, a little further disguise—and he could pass for a Spig on this side. And Von Sternberg was here this afternoon, had started riding north a half hour before the wreck, and I believe had something to do with the murder of Gates and the kidnaping, or whatever it was, of the sergeant!"

I was on my feet in a second.

"Why didn't you spring it right away?" I raved. "We could have got back in the air and combed the country for him! You—"

"Just a minute, please," Gray asked wearily. "I hated to admit to myself what I've told you. Not until you verified my instinctive suspicions about the crash did I make up my mind. And when I did, I knew that I must help catch Von Sternberg—catch him red-handed. And I have a scheme for that. Will you listen a little further, to understand the situation more thoroughly?"

I NODDED. I was pacing the floor, now, unable to keep still. I'd been away from the border, and this new bandit was brand new to me. But the thought of what had happened to Gates—and what might be happening to Baker—was enough to put me on edge for good. Doubtless Baker had been held for ransom. Possibly Gates had fought so hard they'd had to kill him. Jesus Rentaria had got fifteen thousand dollars ransom for Davis and Peterson a couple of years before—and later had got strung to a tree by an expedition of American soldiers and rangers. But it had been proven that army men weren't exempt from bandit attention.

"When I was in France as a buck private I met Von Sternberg," Gray pursued quietly. "He was in the German Air Service. When he was captured he had credit for around thirty allied planes. He's of the nobility, and headed his own circus, similar to the Richtofen and Wolff outfits, you know. I was one of the guards at the prison camp, and got well acquainted with him. And he saved my life at the risk of his own when a prisoner went berserk, just before the armistice.

"Later, in Coblenz, I got to know him better. He's educated, cultured, traveled, charming. When the troops were pulled out of Germany he'd left—he was ruined financially, of course. He turned up here, to my intense surprise, and his. Since then he's dropped in three or four times. As I said, we were intimate friends. To further complicate matters, I'll tell you that he fell in love with Ann here. He told me so. And Ann has been very fond of him. Do you see how all these circumstances combined to make me—both of us—fight to the last ditch against the bare thought of his being—a murderer?"

"Absolutely!" proclaimed Dumpy largely. "And I want to say that you're both wonders to come clean like this!"

He smirked vapidly at the young lady, and her lips formed a silent "thank you" which transported Dumpy to the seventh heaven. I remember thinking it was sort of a flapperish, cheap thing for her to do, in a way, too. Didn't seem quite in her class, as it were.

AS FOR me, many possible inferences were struggling for supremacy in my mind. This Von Sternberg's possibilities were endless—

"When did you suspect him of being this masked bandit, and why?" barked O'Reilly, still in his stooping pose over the table. I don't think his eyes had wavered from Gray's face for a moment.

"His last visit—before today," Gray admitted. "As I said, Von Sternberg was a German ace. I got interested in flying through him, and then out in Hollywood, where there is a lot of flying for the movies and a bunch of passenger carrying ships I had a good many flights and even took a few lessons, becoming so much enthused that I figured on having a plane of my own down here and flying back and forth from the oil fields. I figured it a great business proposition, as well as for pleasure, because oftentimes you have to act fast in that game. I've got some options now up in the Luling field which may require fast action. I was going to try to hire one of you border patrolmen, whom I understand form the best-flying bunch of men in the country, to give me some more lessons.

"Well, as all these things came out, Von Sternberg let some hints drop. Possibilities for making crooked money by plane on this border. You know, smuggling. And then he went on to say that they'd taken to flying their payrolls from Tampico out to the oil fields, and he kidded quite a bit about being an airplane bandit.

"There were other things. He's been all over the world since the war, living by his wits. Admitted it frankly. He evaded the subject when asked what he was doing now, and what he did say was suspicious. He'd look at me knowingly, laugh shortly, ask what a man could do to get along—and always had plenty of money. I didn't tell Ann, of course, until today. And he hinted that we might do business later. He was not above reminding me that I owed my life—and some other things—to him. But I owe nothing whatever big enough to force me to condone murder!"

"Is that all to connect him with this bandit?"

It was O'Reilly again, a compact package of compressed energy. That deep voice of his just boomed through the room.

"No. In size, method of working, daring, and, in the case of the robbing of the Manson ranchhouse, a horse—all connect him with it."

I stopped my pacing before him, and asked my question.

"What do you think happened to Gates and Baker?"

"I think that Von Sternberg, who had two Mexicans with him when he left here, lured the ship to the ground in some way. I believe his object was to steal it! He might have laid down as though hurt, or done anything else to get Gates to land on that good field. I think he wanted a ship, and naturally would steal it. The idea would appeal to him, anyhow. Then, perhaps, Gates fought so hard that he was killed—possibly in an effort merely to stun him. His skull was bashed in by a blunt instrument, I believe. Then the ship was turned on its nose, by Von Sternberg and his aids, and burned to cover the crime."

"What about Baker?" shot O'Reilly.

"I don't know. Possibly he was held for ransom. Possibly taken with Von Sternberg for a few hours to keep him from giving the alarm too soon. In that case—I hate to say it—I would be surprised if the sergeant ever came home."

A STRANGLED sob came from the davenport. Ann was hiding her face, her shoulders heaving briefly. Dumpy, his fat face looking simple as only a lovesick swain's can, bent over and patted her and told her not to feel bad and other sensible pieces of advice.

"Sounds reasonable," blazed O'Reilly, coming around the table with a curious crouching, catlike stride. "But why didn't you tell us right away, to give us a chance to get after Baker? To hell with international law or flying over Mexico or anything else in a case like that!"

"Perhaps I was wrong," admitted Gray. "First, I wasn't sure until you came, as I've said. Second, knowing Von Sternberg, his ability, and his intelligence, I knew that he would figure out exactly what happened—in advance.

"He'd know I'd get there, having seen the plane land, within a few minutes of his departure. He'd not think I'd suspect foul play, probably, but he'd know I'd telephone the authorities, and that as soon as flyers arrived on the scene they'd miss Baker—and possibly figure out that it was a very peculiar wreck. He'd realize that they'd search for Baker from the air.

"That would mean that he must get under cover before planes arrived. I'm convinced that while I was still watching Gates' funeral pyre he and his men were getting across the border, and that by the time you arrived he was under cover in Mexico. Of course, I think the killing of Gates was more or less an accident. I hope so. But in any event, his plans went wrong.

"I was weak, doubtless, not to tell you as soon as you had confirmed my suspicions of the wreck—but it is my honest opinion that scouring around, the few minutes before dark came, would have done no good."

And I was forced to agree with him.

"What's your scheme?"

The question was from O'Reilly, who was certainly hewing to the line. Planted on his widespread feet like a short block of marble, his fingers stabbed out at Gray with the question.

"Just this," was the equable reply. "He'll come back here—maybe in a day, perhaps a week. Very probably he has a crooked proposition up his sleeve. In any event, I can gain his confidence. With me as a stool pigeon, he can be caught—and caught right. I'm positive he's planning something bigger than horseback raids.

"You people can keep a man or men here, and hide a plane in my shed, until that happens. The Mexican authorities—possibly sincere in their efforts—have never been able to touch him despite complaints. He works freely on this side—whether he's bribed certain officials remains to be seen. The point is that he's hard to get. I'll help—and God, how I hate it!"

"Sure," I agreed. "Now, Percival, what do you know of Von Sternberg?"

"Nothing personally," returned Penoch, but he had hesitated before speaking. "A lot by reputation. He was an instructor in the Mexican Air Service before I landed at Mexico City myself. Heard a lot of stories. He was always picking up money by hook or crook—gambling, a bit of airplane smuggling, stealing rides for people—all that. What I hold in my mind about him, after all the stories, is a big, handsome daredevil without an ounce of honor in his make-up, and not afraid of the President of Mexico, the devil, the United States of America, or God Almighty. I'd had a sneaking admiration for him, as a matter of fact."

"I'll stay here," Dumpy interjected excitedly. "We'll get him! Good flyer, is he? Well, I've played tag with a lot of those birds!"

"I'm getting busy on the phone right now!" I told the gathering suddenly. It took about two strides for my elongated legs to cover that room, and I used "official" plenty while conversing with operators. In less than ten minutes I had the customs service and the rangers notified, and Army headquarters likewise. Then I landed McMullen on the phone, and talked several dollars' worth with Captain Kennard.

"Stay the night, of course, and phone in the morning!" he told me tersely. "Sounds O.K. if Gray's all right. I'll get busy on this end in several directions. We've been waiting to nab that bandit for weeks—like to get him. 'By."

I KNEW what the captain meant. The air would be shivering with radiograms here and there, and the telegraph lines busy, and the telephone far from idle. By morning he'd have so many different wires working that Sergeant Baker would be the most looked for man on the continent. And various investigations would be under way.

It was around nine o'clock when we sat down to a perfectly appointed dinner table, and were prepared to be served by a white-coated Chink. It was beyond my poor powers of imagination to remember all the time that surrounding that home was the border, and that a murder had taken place a mile away that afternoon. And that Baker was over across the river somewhere, in bandits' hands—or worse.

In the temporary lull, I took note of Lieutenant Dumpy Scarth and Miss Ann Gray. Dumpy, for the past half-hour, had been telling of his amazing flying experience—and this Ann Gray was sure eating them alive.

Every once in a while, when Dumpy got unusually vivid, illustrating his masterly handling of stick and rudder in some death defying climax, Percival Enoch O'Reilly would emit a reverberating "ho, ho, ho!" which invariably threw Dumpy off his beat.

Finally, when O'Reilly had listened attentively to Dumpy's yarn about putting another ship out of commission with his own, in the air and without using his guns, Percival Enoch added a snort to his laughter.

"Mr. O'Reilly, are you insinuating that Lieutenant Scarth is not telling the truth?" It was Ann Gray, and she certainly did procure utter silence. Eyes snapping, face slightly flushed, she just called Penoch cold.

"Don't mind him, Ann," Dumpy said contemptuously. "He doesn't know—"

"Perhaps you'd like to tell us about your experience as a Methodist deacon," the girl said witheringly.

Penoch, entirely unruffled, laid down his fork.

"Doggoned if that wasn't funny!" he said with an unembarassed grin. "Hoboed into Bilato, Kansas, one time, broke and hungry, palmed myself off as an evangelist, held a meeting, preached a powerful discourse, converted four sinners and took up a collection. And the collection was only forty-three cents! I ate eight hot dogs on it!"

No one could remain sober under the battering of that Rabelaisian laugh, even Ann relaxed.

"One time when I was flying over Nixon and hit the church steeple—" Dumpy started, and was off on another story.

No sooner had he paused for breath after the conclusion of his yarn than I, out of pure maliciousness, egged Penoch into doing his stuff by asking him about the time he became a Moro chieftain.

"Oh, that was just luck," he answered quickly, "but Scarth's story reminds me of the time I landed old Colonel Kellog in a rice field in Louisiana, thinking it was a nice, level pasture instead of a pool of water covered with those green shoots."

And he was off on a sidesplitting narrative in which he was far from a hero. His total lack of self consciousness was sublime. From Poland to Mexico City ranged the scenes of his ribald anecdotes—and none depending on the ability of Penoch O'Reilly for their points.

DUMPY was swelled up like a balloon fish half the time, and his mouth was gaping in the manner of that festive fish. Not in amazement or admiration of O'Reilly, either. He was merely on the verge of breaking into more speech himself. He fairly jiggled up and down with repressed hot air, waiting his turn to talk.

He slid in the story of the time when he'd made a vertical bank around the one skyscraper in Waco, Texas, and scraped his wing on the building when O'Reilly boomed forth:

"That's one of the dumbest tricks I ever heard of a flyer's pulling. Almost as inexcusable as what I did in Kentucky. I was to fly an artillery colonel to Indianapolis. I got inveigled into an all-night poker game, with moonshine refreshments. But I didn't know the shape I was in. I got in the air—I remember that. Seemed like a minute later I looked at the clock. It was an hour and a half after the takeoff, and I couldn't remember flying at all! And I didn't know any more where I was than as though I'd slept twenty years. I was flying north up a railroad track.

"And I got to thinking that if I'd been able to stay in the air in that shape, maybe I'd flown the course automatically likewise. If so, I was beyond Indianapolis, and maybe that railroad, followed south, would get me back there. But I didn't want the colonel to know how close to his eternal roost he'd been—or that I'd made this error. So I put the ship in the slightest of banks, and started circling. It took me forty miles to get straightened around south again, and this guy didn't know he hadn't been flying straight ahead all the time! We came into Indianapolis from the north, and then, like the dub I am, I knocked off a wheel landing! Since then I've made it a rule never to fly a passenger except when sober. Ho, ho, ho!"

"You should have been shot at sunrise!" Dumpy informed him vindictively. "One time I—"

The telephone bell clattered through the air.

"Excuse me," chuckled Gray, with a glance at Penoch, and Dumpy ceased firing until his audience should be complete. A few seconds later, and I was called to the phone.

When that happened Penoch's battered, grinning face became serious, and his shining eyes followed me across the room and into the hall. He was hoping that something important was up.

Dumpy started talking, and I heard, as I picked up the receiver, O'Reilly's bellowed: "Shut up!"

"Slim?" barked over the wires. "Kennard. Ever hear of this masked bandit? Dumpy knows of him. Spig been going wild for a couple of months. Just got a message, relayed from Sheriff Trowbridge. This bandit's just paid a visit to the Fox ranch, ten miles northeast of where you are this minute. Cut the wrong wire, thinking it was the phone, and Mrs. Fox got word to McMullen. Landed two thousand dollars in cash in the house, and some other stuff. Left ranchhouse for the border—four men with him—nearly half an hour ago. You and Dumpy get in the air, stop any gang you see with your guns! Ground men'll come as soon as they can. Stop 'em on the river and hold 'em. Shoot if necessary—hop to it! You know what to do!"

"DESSERT'S arrived, boys!" I shouted as I gamboled back into the diningroom. "Gray, your masked bandit's just pulled a job ten miles north of here, and is on his way to the border now! Come on, Dumpy—you too, Penoch! We get in the air at once, and stop this boy!"

When Penoch got to his feet it was with the effect of having been blown out of his chair. I'll swear it seemed that he leaped five feet in the air and came down with a thump.

"Get us horses, Gray, pronto!" I told him—and at the moment noticed his face for the first time.

It was bitter and savage, the eyes gleaming unhealthily. Evidently the approaching showdown with his friend was no pleasant happening for him to look forward to.

Two minutes later we were galloping wildly through the mesquite. Back of us, making slow time in the returned car, came the Grays, inching their way across the open country with much less speed than our horses made. Not a one of us said a word, except Penoch, who took a brief look at the sky.

"Have a moon," he shouted. "Good!"

I figured we had about fifteen minutes before they could make the border. As soon as we had the ships started, idling along on the preliminary warmup, I gathered the other two about me as the Grays joined us. Ann's face was white and strained, her eyes glowing with a sort of tigerish excitement the intensity of which surprised me.

"Penoch and I'll patrol up and down the river, covering a mile along the section where they'd hit the water if they rode a beeline," I snapped briefly. "That's about a mile west of here. Dumpy, you shoot north and see if you can pick 'em up in the 'squite within five miles of the river right now. We—"

"I want to stay on the river!" Dumpy broke in feverishly. "There's more chance of getting hurt there in case something happens to you—"

He had glanced at the girl as he said that. Trying to impress her. And he wanted to fly where she'd see him.

"All right!" I fairly spat at him. "Penoch and I'll be back in time to help, anyway—we won't waste time in the 'squite."

Dumpy was a master flyer with plenty of nerve, and would be just as effective on the river as any one, even should he be alone.

"Don't worry, Ann!" Dumpy told the girl spaciously. "This sort of stuff is our regular meat!"

"God!" O'Reilly rasped prayerfully. "Let's go, Slim!"

We wasted no time after we'd got into our ships. Gray had been instructed what to do, and he did it. He ran alongside my ship, hands on one wing, as I taxied the big ton and a half bomber through the night. At the end of the field, with the exhaust pipes spitting flame, he helped turn the ship on a dime.

Then he ran back for Dumpy's ship as I shoved the throttle all the way on.

"Giver 'er hell, big boy!" came an ear-shattering roar from the transfigured O'Reilly, standing in the back seat, and the DeHaviland was rushing for the bank of black shadow on the far side of the field.

THERE is nothing in all flying, as far as sustained thrill is concerned, to match the wild surge of excitement and anticipation of a takeoff at night in a strange field. A thousand possibilities for something to go wrong—and sure crash if it does. Nothing in sight—just a blind rush through the dark.

We made it, and roared over the bounding mesquite with plenty of space to spare. The cool, smooth night air caused the ship to fly with unusual buoyancy, and in a moment, three hundred feet high, I had a chance to settle down and watch Dumpy below. He was just getting off, two red streaks of fire marking his progress across the field. Suddenly I saw them change a bit, and angle upward.

He was zooming again to give the Grays a thrill. Suddenly a thought hit me. He was a poor man for the river, at that. Certainly, if the Grays could get close enough to see anything without endangering themsleves, they'd do it. And with that knowledge Dumpy Scarth would do his best to see to it that the aerial roundup was made in the most ornate style. Which meant increased chances of disaster.

However, the dice had been thrown, and if it was craps it would be hard luck. I sent the ship hurtling out over the mesquite, angled northwest, to intercept the course of the bandits. Dumpy's exhaust flames were disappearing toward the river. Crawling through the mesquite to the south was a wan light, like a single firefly almost out of gas. That was the Grays' car, making for the river.

Captain Kennard hadn't mentioned any cattle running. The Fox ranch was a small Texas truck farm of scarcely five thousand acres. But Fox had a few hundred extra fine blooded cattle. Evidently the bandit's organization was such that he received tipoffs on Americans. Otherwise he couldn't have known that there was considerable money in the ranchhouse. Furthermore, the place must have been almost deserted for the five men to pull the job. Certainly there weren't a half-dozen cowboys hanging around.

Another thing bothered me. Perhaps we hadn't used the right strategy. If they heard a ship, they'd try to hide, almost certainly. That is, ride under the thickest possible camouflage of undergrowth and mesquite. I might have made a mistake in coming north with my ship; possibly it would have been best to wait at the river.

AS NEARLY as I could figure, we'd reached the approximate strip of territory which should contain our quarry—and the man who could clear up the death of Bert Gates and the disappearance of the sergeant. That was another funny thing. If Baker had been merely captured and held, he must be with that mob! They'd been on their way to pull the job when the crash had happened. They had scarcely had time to return over the border to some hiding place, and then come back. Which meant that shooting to kill was out of the question, no matter how desperate the emergency. We'd get Baker too.

I cut the gun briefly, and shouted that hunch to O'Reilly. In the moonlight it seemed that his eyebrows and mustache were absolutely white—he was like a freakish goblin of the upper air as he nodded his comprehension. Was he enjoying things? Say, his eyes nearly shot sparks through his goggles.

I turned south, and zigzagged back toward the river, five miles away. The moon was fairly bright, and made the mesquite a silver sea below us, splotched with white where the moonlight struck the sand. On toward the Rio Grande I went, covering a strip four miles wide as I crisscrossed the course. I was only three hundred feet high, and we could have seen riders below.

Suddenly I felt a grip that made me wince, and Penoch O'Reilly was pointing downward, and diagonally ahead.

As I went for the spot he had indicated, what he thought he'd seen became a fact. Five riders, and riding for all they were worth through the thinning mesquite.

In a second I'd made up my mind. They were slightly less than a mile from the river. And on the banks of the river there was practically open country, broken here and there with clumps of chaparral.

I jammed the throttle all the way on, and just for luck sent a burst from my machine guns into the ground in front of the hard-riding men on the ground. Then I flew for the river, to get Dumpy. We'd stop 'em right at the border line, as Kennard had suggested. And two ships obviated the chance of their escaping in the event of one D.H. going wrong.

I got very close to the river within thirty seconds, but Dumpy I could not see. Then, at least a half mile eastward, I picked up his ship. He was down low over the water, his plane like a giant dragon fly darting over the moon-silvered stream.

"What in God's name is he flying so low for, where he can't see for any distance," I remember asking myself—and getting an answer.

"The Grays are probably somewhere along the bank, watching, and he's giving 'em a thrill," was the reply, and then, more charitably: "Or maybe he thought he saw something up there."

I made for him, angling toward the river. For a moment he went out of sight, behind a clump of 'squite. Then the D.H. shot upward in a climbing turn. Dumpy was about to make the trip back.

I WAS within a few hundred yards of him as the D.H. practically stalled, had its nose turned westward. It settled—he'd killed his flying speed. A great tongue of fire from the flooded engine spurted forth from each exhaust pipe. The next second the wheels of the settling ship—settling because that foolish climbing turn so close to the ground had stalled it—skipped the water. The DeHaviland seemed to bounce into the air, turning a somersault as the water clung to the undercarriage just long enough to turn the D.H. over. A split second later the ship crashed into the water, upside down.

There it was, underside turned to the sky, the tail from the water. I was circling over it now, a flyer gone half crazy. There was our quarry back there, within a half mile of the river—and Dumpy had not emerged from the muddied water. If he had not been knocked unconscious, he should be out from under his ship by now. Just a matter of unsnapping the belt and crawling out—

Again that grip, and I turned to confront two eyes that blazed like a cat's in the dark. Three simple motions, and I knew what O'Reilly meant.

At the moment it seemed a sensible, ordinary thing to do. Dumpy Scarth, whom we cussed and at times hated and knew we were fond of all the time, was drowning down there.

Before I could gather my thoughts together O'Reilly was out of his cockpit, one foot in my seat. As I circled back he was hanging outside the front cockpit by his hands. As easily as a professional acrobat he made the wing—and twice he was hanging over space by just one hand, gripping the cowling. Then he was alongside the motor, on the wing runway. I was a hundred yards east of Dumpy's floating wreck, and pointed back westward as O'Reilly crawled along the wing on his stomach. He reached the tip, and one hand found the little opening on the very edge of the wing tip, provided for a mechanic's grip when helping turn a ship or guiding its course on the ground. As I cut the gun slightly, and got down within five feet of the water, Penoch O'Reilly's body disappeared—except for one hand.

He was hanging from that wingtip.

Suddenly my sprained brain got one of its intervals of coherence and clarity. I was as cool as the night air that brushed my face, and it seemed that the bomber was a mere plaything in my hands.

Ten feet above the water, a hundred feet back of the wreck, my seventy feet of wingspread almost scraping the bushes on the river banks, it seemed. And I brought the DeHaviland up into the air in a half zoom, and as I did so turned it on its side with stick and rudder. It was a sixty degree bank—and I was slipping the ship straight downward, with very little forward speed.

The wing to which Penoch was hanging was pointed down, of course.

Twenty feet above the water, I caught the ship, and slowed its downward speed. Your rudder becomes your elevator, and vice versa, when in a bank of more than forty-five degrees. For a second we hovered, on one wing there, and in that second the indomitable O'Reilly loosed his hold. How he did it I don't know to this day, but he hit the water with his body in a tight ball, like a porcupine in distress.

He was but twenty feet from the wreck, and I saw him come to the surface and fan through the water toward the DeHaviland.

He was all right. Whether he could get the unconscious Dumpy out in time to save him from drowning I knew not, but there was nothing more I could do. At the moment I didn't realize that I had seen one of the nerviest pieces of air work ever attempted.

I FLEW the Rio Grande west, taking the turns in that crooked river like a railroad train on the rails. And I swooped around one of them just in time to see two riders clambering up the bank on the Mexican side, another within five feet of it, a fourth close behind him.

The fifth was fully twenty feet back of the fourth man.

My decision was automatic, without conscious thought. Baker might be one of the four but certainly no prisoner would be bringing up the rear. The others had escaped—but one man could give us what information we needed to help us.

I shot a burst of bullets into the water, over his head. Any one on the border knew what that meant—and that a De Haviland in the air was the Federal Government.

But this rider did not stop. His horse was making tough work of it. His progress was slow—but it remained progress.

There was but one thing to do. I'm not a killer, and I wanted that man alive, but I had to take the chance. When he was fifteen feet from the Mexican side I gave it to him—and he toppled from his horse. The horse was dead as a door-nail, apparently, floating slowly down the stream. And a weakly struggling man clung to the saddle alongside, and floated with him.

I waited just long enough to watch the fleeing riders get a mile into Mexico, and then roared back up the river. I found three people standing on the bank opposite the wrecked D. H.—and one on the ground. As I swooped so low that my wheels fairly scraped the scattered trees that prone figure sat up.

DUMPY SCARTH was alive. And the Grays had helped to bring him to.

Again I came by, and motioned down the river. The Gray car was several hundred yards away, but there was no road for it to travel on. I waited to watch the tireless O'Reilly start down the bank of the stream, and then went on ahead to guide him. I circled the floating carcass and its living supercargo until O'Reilly arrived. The little Irishman took most of his clothes off, and within ten minutes had the man I'd shot on the American side of the river.

As I left the scene, to get on the ground, I took a flash downward at Penoch from a spot about ten feet above the river. Gleaming white in his underwear, mud and weeds still enswathing his head and face, bare feet wide apart and unmindful of tarantulas and rattlers and such, O'Reilly waved at me. And I almost thought I could hear him bellowing delightedly:

"Ho, ho, ho!"

On my gallop through the air back to the landing field, I spotted the Gray car making a detour in the general direction of Penoch, and decided that there was little sense of my attempting to return to the scene, after landing via horseback. So, after feeling my way down into the field, and making it safely, I had leisure to think matter over.

There was no need of attempting to count chickens before they were hatched. O'Reilly's wave had meant that everything was all right. Which included, I assumed, that we had made no mistake in the identity of the riders. Whether or not our one captive would talk was on the knees of the gods.

All that would come out later. But at the moment one thought stood out in my mind like a sparrow in Detroit. That was the deed done by O'Reilly in going down after Dumpy.

The flyer below in the river had been not only an acquaintance of but a few hours, but, in general, O'Reilly's enemy. And the Rio Grande has a habit of being very shallow for diving purposes. Penoch, instantly and without question, had tried to throw his life to whatever fish inhabit that muddy stream.

Even more impressive was the manner in which it had been performed. There had been no white-hot inspiration—no inner flame which had made him forget his own personal safety—concerned in the deed. Rather, it seemed to me, he had taken it as a matter of course, without the quiver of a nerve or the tremor of a heart-string. If there had been any emotion at all, it had been a boyish delight in the "kick" of the thing. It was apparent to me that the little question of how long Percival Enoch O'Reilly inhabited this vale of tears meant less to said P. Enoch than to any one else.

I commenced to think of him differently, right then, and to sense mental constitution somewhat different than any I'd previously dissected. His hundred humorous brushes with fate had stamped him a devil-may-care play-boy. Now I knew that he was all iron. And that caused me to think back to the brief moment when I'd seen him in the grip of simon-pure fury.

I decided that O'Reilly, really stirred into raging action, would be as terrible a foe to struggle with as could well be imagined. He'd never forget, never give up, and never know what fear meant nor figure the odds against him. He would be a human machine, pressing ever forward to crush one.

As I threw myself into a chair on the Gray veranda, it may be that the events of the night, plus the night itself which seemed vibrating with sinister possibilities, which caused me to become somewhat exaggerated in my mental reactions. But that little brown-faced runt with the Gargantuan laugh and the scarred pan and the ridiculous mustache seemed to grow and grow into a sort of giant of my imagination. And I had a hunch crawling in and out of my mental chambers that I didn't know the half of it.

I was musing about the past years on the border, and how true to form this day had been, when the luxurious touring car of this amazing Gray menage rolled into the clearing and stopped before the porch. Gray, Dumpy and Ann were in the front seat. In the rear was O'Reilly, guarding a corpse.

"Our bandit's dead!" bellowed O'Reilly.

I darted a look at the girl. She ran into the house, and I could not estimate just what effect a night ride with a dead body had had on her.

"But," O'Reilly went on jovially, as I came to the side of the car, "we got the masked bandit. At least, this bozo had that two thousand in his pockets, and some jewelry, and a mask as well. And you should carry him if you don't think he's big!"

"Von Sternberg," I yelped with excitement. "What luck! Did he talk—"

"Hold your horses, caballero," bade Penoch, hopping out of the car. "It's the masked bandit, but it isn't Von Sternberg!"

Gray was motionless at the wheel, and he did not turn his head.

"Wrong, eh Gray?" I demanded.

He nodded wearily, and slowly got to the ground.

"Of course," he said slowly. "It doesn't mean at all that I'm wrong about Fred not being on the level. It does mean that he wasn't, personally, the masked bandit. But Von Sternberg was here on the ground when Gates was killed—and this bandit here was also in the vicinity, doubtless. Which may or may not mean anything—"

"Did he talk?" I demanded. "He was alive when you got him—"

"A little."

All four of us—Dumpy, Gray, O'Reilly and I—were standing alongside the car, very close together. Dumpy hadn't said a word. For once his tongue was still because of what O'Reilly had done for him, I think.

"What did he say?" I asked crisply.

"Nothing that would help."

As O'Reilly said that those eyes of his just bored right into my own. Then they shifted to Dumpy Scarth, and seemed to be digging into that rather wan young gentleman's very skull.

And I knew right then that O'Reilly had heard something from this unknown Mexican—something that he did not want to confide in us. His look into my eyes had been significant, as though to warn me not to press him. And as he stood there, neck craned forward and staring into Dumpy's face, it was as though he was trying, without words, to make that chubby flyer uncomfortable with his inferences.

Gray's face was rather pale, I thought. No one uttered a word, and, for no reason, the silence was tense and meaningful.

Suddenly O'Reilly relaxed.

"Gray's going to take the stiff in to the undertaker," he said carelessly. "I've got the dough and jewels. I—"

"Come right in here, Bob!" came Ann's voice. "Didn't I tell you not to stay out of bed a minute?"

And Dumpy paddled up on the porch, weaving a little from weakness. And through the window I observed Ann fussing around him as he lay on a couch and fussing in a very pitying, romantic and tender way.

"I'll be back in an hour," Gray said lifelessly, and was off.

"HELL of a night eh?" asked O'Reilly oratorically. "What do you know about that half-wit Scarth trying to make his ship into a water-bug, and crashing under such circumstances? Put him in the air to drop flowers at a funeral and he'd chase the hearse up a side street to give the mourners a treat!"

"Never mind that. What did the bandit say on his death-bed?"

"Nothing important."

"The hell he didn't," I told him elegantly. "Come clean!"

"Where do you get that stuff?" he roared like a swelling bullfrog.

I looked at him long and intently.

"Is there any good reason why you shouldn't give me the dope?"

For a moment, a telltale moment, he hesitated. Then:

"This bird did some goofy raving before he died. Von Sternberg was mentioned. And what this Spig's delirious yelling hinted at is something that—I'm going to prove personally before I say anything. It concerns a flyer, see? I'd be a fine egg to say anything unless I was positive, wouldn't I? And I can soon be positive, get me? Now, for God's sake Slim, don't ask any more questions!"

Which left me steaming in a fog. Was the dead Bert Gates' memory to be smirched? Or Baker's?

Was Dumpy Scarth, by any stretch of the imagination, mixed up in it? He was young and crazy—

"Let's phone the captain," I said abruptly, and went into the house. Ann was tenderly washing off a large bump on the forehead of the smirking Scarth. And Dumpy, to my eagle eye, was pretending to be a lot sicker than he was.

O'Reilly stopped alongside the couch. Hands on hips, feet wide apart, his face like a worldly wise elf's as those white eyebrows raised quizzically, he merely gazed at the tableau in sardonic silence. Then that incongruous bass boomed forth.

"Pretty lucky, Dumpy! I thought I'd get ahead of you by pulling that hero stuff, but I'm not getting a look-in!"

Ann Gray darted a look upward at him, and then dropped her eyes like a flash. Dumpy grinned complacently.

"Just because I've been busy and haven't had a chance," O'Reilly pursued calmly, "doesn't mean that what I announced a while back doesn't go. I'm just telling you, Ann, that you're the best-looking girl I ever saw, and just made to order for one Lieutenant O'Reilly. And he's going to rush you right off your feet, if he can, and make you forget this bird here."

All this was said with entire seriousness, and lack of embarrassment. I was between a strangled laugh and a gasp of amazement, which combination nearly burst a blood-vessel in my Adam's apple.

"Don't get me wrong," warned the sublimely collected Penoch. "This love at first sight business is usually a sign of bad peepers. I'm not saying that. But you certainly bounced one off my chin that caught me in the solar plexus on the rebound, and I'm completely non compus mentis about any other dame. Figured I wouldn't have a chance to get you alone for a while, so I'm putting in my bid right at the start. O. K.?"

I took one look at the gathering around the couch. Ann Gray's head was bent, and she was biting her lips. Dumpy's round face was red with wrath. O'Reilly, his red hair mussed and his barrel-like body enclosed in skin-tight wet clothes, splotched with muck, stood there like a calm colossus.

I made one leap into the hallway, and collapsed in a series of muffled snorts, moans and tears of joy. Talk about a sheik!

I was still laughing when I got Kennard on the phone. I started to report, and he interrupted me and wiped the grins out of my system for a long time.

"Tell me in the morning—I'll be in at dawn," came that rasping bark over the phone. "Sergeant Baker's just been found a mile from the airdrome, shot to death."

CAPTAIN KENNARD arrived on schedule, and met four sleepless men who'd spent a bad night. Ann Gray had gone to bed. One of the worst features of the night had been the constant bickering between O'Reilly and Scarth. I'd heard O'Reilly say, just after Ann had gone to bed:

"Because I saved your life doesn't mean that I'm not going to knock the spots out of you for your running remarks about me—and I want no gratitude on your part, understand? There's only one thing'll save you from the doggondest beating you ever had, and that's to apologize—"

"The hell I will!" blazed the indomitable Dumpy, and that was that.

And it had grown worse through the night. There was a very curious change in O'Reilly's attitude toward Dumpy. Whereas it had been a sort of impersonal, passionless determination to stop Dumpy's bragging, it grew to a savage personal dislike, it seemed to me. And I wondered whether a girl whom they'd known only a few hours could be responsible for it.

"Probably on Dumpy's part, but I can't believe it of O'Reilly," I decided.

Kennard scrutinized Gray carefully, and we went into a discussion. The end of said confab found us united in the belief that this unknown Von Sternberg was the head of a considerable organization of which the masked bandit was a part, and that said organization was starting to come to grips with the border patrol for reasons unknown, but surmised. Probably, we decided, for the purpose of stealing some ships and taking to the air against us. Which presupposed smuggling. Baker, we figured, had escaped in some manner and been trailed. He'd been killed to keep his mouth shut. A riderless horse had been found within a mile of the spot in the mesquite where the fleeing sergeant had been shot.

The connection of Von Sternberg with the masked bandit was simply the result of Penoch's story that the name had been recognized by the bandit, when O'Reilly had mentioned it—recognized with a fleeting, sardonic smile.

What other thing was in O'Reilly's mind as a result of that conversation he did not mention, nor did I hint that he tell it. You may think that peculiar, but I had come to have a high respect for that young man. And I'd be the last one to insist that gossip involving one of the patrol be broadcast without foundation, even to myself.

Penoch O'Reilly, on his own, would ferret out that foundation, or the lack of it, and keep his own counsel until he had finished.

IT WAS seven o'clock in the morning as we had coffee, and Captain Kennard summed up our plans.

"Somebody's going to pay for these murders," he rasped savagely, "and it looks as though Von Sternberg would be the one. Gray, your story seems to make him the inevitable villain.

"The idea of your baiting a trap for him, is a good one. But it seems unnecessary and possibly unwise to have a flyer and ship stationed here all the time. Patrols are going to be continuous during daylight hours from now on. There'll be a plane within a few miles of you all the time. A system of signals will fix things. But we don't want to sweep down on him without the facts which will convict him. If he comes here to talk to you, the plane'll land so we can meet him in the flesh. Throw in with him if he broaches any criminal scheme, and keep us informed. Meanwhile, the government will be on the trail of the rest of the bandit gang, and looking up the gentleman's activities in Mexico.

"From what you people say of him, and what has transpired, I have an idea that what the gentleman contemplates will be an operation on a large scale. We'll see to it that the border is prepared."

Ann came down, and went straight to Dumpy's side. Careless of the stranger present, or of any one else, she bent solicitously over him, touched the little bump with one hand, and smiled a smile down into his fatuous eyes which would have had more effect on me personally than an absinthe eye-opener. So you can imagine what it did to Dumpy.

I could scarcely believe it, but it appeared that that gorgeous girl was most deeply impressed by the fat little flyer. However, women are very peculiar pickers, some times.

Of course, men aren't.

She had barely been introduced to the stocky captain, when she asked: "Captain, I have a favor to ask of you. I'm sure the others won't mind. Poor Lieutenant Scarth here has had so many flying mishaps, that my brother and I both agree he needs a rest. Some of the stories he told last night were enough to make one's blood run cold! Would it be too much to ask that the flyer you leave stationed here be him?"

"There won't be any flyer stationed here, Miss Gray," barked the captain, and several embryo grins chased themselves across his face. "Sorry."

Dumpy's face fell.

"Honest, Captain, it seems best," he exploded. "Just leave me here and I'll knock this Von Sternberg into a cocked hat—"

"Sure!" agreed the captain heartily. "But we'll need every flyer for patrols. This latest exploit of the bandits—and these murders—have got the country by the ears, and patrols, as I said, will be continuous. It wouldn't surprise me to see night flying lights along this border within three months, either!"

THE white-faced, haggard-looking Gray jumped a foot as the telephone rang. When he went in I noticed O'Reilly. His round blue eyes were hard as granite, and he was gazing fixedly at Ann Gray and Dumpy, who were talking in low tones.

"This certainly is a remarkable layout," I remember telling myself gleefully. "Penoch O'Reilly's about the only man in the world who'd have said what he did last night to the girl—and I guess Ann Gray's movie life must have sort of taught her to come right to the point. That request for Dumpy in person was pretty raw!"

O'Reilly strode to the doorway, where he leaned carelessly. He was one human being who seemed tireless.

Evidently he could overhear some part of the telephone conversation, for he inclined his head slightly as though trying to make sure that what he was hearing from within was accurate. Ann, too, seemed worried about the meaning of the call. Inasmuch as the ringing of that phone had meant important news in every case for the past few hours, I sort of shared in their interest.

The conversation was brief, and in a moment Gray strode out on the porch. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes flashing with excitement.

"Captain," he said abruptly. "I have an unusual favor to ask of you. I want to ask you to have me flown to San Antonio right away—either myself or my sister."

Ann seemed frozen to her chair, her wide eyes on her brother.

"Why?" barked Kennard.

Gray turned swiftly toward me.

"As I told these fellows, I'm interested in the Luling oil-field," he said quickly. "You all know what that game is. It appears that I can make a large amount of money if I can get up there today—which will be impossible by rail. Ann knows all about our leases, too—even she could attend to the business. We have options on other acres we must take up today. A well came in unexpectedly near us, and they expire at midnight tonight. "I realize that it is an unusual and unheard of thing to ask. But I make this offer. If you'll send a ship up there with either Ann or myself, I'll contribute one thousand dollars to the nearest heir or heirs of both Sergeant Baker and Lieutenant Gates—two thousand dollars in all. You can have travelers' checks which I happen to have left for that amount right in your hands before the ship starts!"

THAT, in a manner of speaking, put a new complexion on things. Baker had a wife and child in San Antonio, we knew. I didn't know it at the time, but Gates had a widowed mother, too. The captain did know about that. He made up his mind instantly.

"All right," he said crisply. "If you're sure your sister will do just as well up there, send her. Never can tell what'll happen down here, and we need you on the ground for a variety of reasons. You understand that you'll have to sign a release of responsibility in case of a wreck, do you not? No claims against the government or any one else?"

"I do!" nodded the excited Gray. "Sis, get packed right away."

Without a word she flew up-stairs.

"Let me fly her!" yapped Dumpy, now a perfectly well man. "Please, Cap'n."

Kennard flashed a look at Penoch and me. O'Reilly's face was a study as he looked at the red-faced, glowing-eyed Scarth.

"Seems to be no competition for the job," Kennard stated. "Go to it."

In a few minutes Dumpy, Penoch, the girl and myself were on our way in the car, with her two suitcases. The captain and Gray were drawing up the release of responsibility and arranging the cash payment.

Penoch grabbed the two suitcases at the edge of the field, and carried them to the ship. Just before I got out of the car he leaned over to me.

"Give me a chance for a private word with him," he whispered, and was off.

I was completely puzzled, which isn't unusual. I'm just a lanky, dumb bird who sort of flaps and flounders his way through life, sometimes stumbling accidentally on explanations and ideas with which my mental processes have nothing to do.

"Might as well sit here a few minutes in comfort," I told the girl. "The warm-up will take a few minutes."

As the motor started I was helping her adjust the borrowed helmet and goggles, and seeing to it that she was properly enswathed in the flying coveralls. Her eyes were like stars, her face flushed, her body fairly quivering with excited anticipation.

That being done, and my curiosity growing greater and greater as time went on, I cast a glance at the ship and said as casually as possible:

"Just wait here a while while I go over and see if I can help."

THE ship was fifty yards away, idling. No one was in the cockpit, however. Both Dumpy and O'Reilly were on the far side of the D. H., out of sight save for their legs.

As I strolled around the tail, coming within sight of them as an uninvited guest, I stopped in some surprise. Penoch's neck was thrust forward, his face was within inches of the raging countenance of Scarth, and he was saying something in no uncertain manner.

"No!" yelled Dumpy, one finger wagging in Penoch's face.

Casting a hasty glance behind me, I perceived that the girl was wandering toward the ship.

"What's the matter!" I exploded disgustedly. "If you two banty roosters don't quit fighting around here—"

"Why, this damn fool wanted me to—"

"Shut up, damn you!" roared Penoch, and in a split second he had Dumpy by the neck and was shaking him back and forth like a rat. For a second I was too stunned with surprise to move, as was the purple Scarth.

Then his stocky, powerful body twisted and squirmed, and his fist sank with a thud into Penoch's stomach. The little adventurer released his hold, fell back momentarily, and then hurled himself forward. It did not last five seconds, honestly, but never in my life have I seen anything so amazing.

Penoch hit Dumpy like an oversized cannon-ball. That isn't the simile either, for O'Reilly was a flying mass of arms and legs. I'll swear he kicked Dumpy several times in the shins and hit him at least ten times within that five seconds. He was moving so fast that his limbs were blurred, and when the cyclone was over Dumpy was on the ground, Penoch leaning over him.

And O'Reilly's face wasn't impersonal or collected. For the second time I saw raw hatred shine from his eyes, and he snarled his words. "Get up before she gets here, damn you, and keep your mouth shut!" he rasped. "And by God you do what I told you about continuing to keep that mouth shut, or I'll resign from the army just to get you!"

He had Dumpy by the back of the coveralls, and jerked that maddened youngster to his feet.

"Act as though nothing had happened!" snarled O'Reilly. "Get in that cockpit!"

And Dumpy did. For a moment it seemed that his stubbornness would result in further complications, but O'Reilly's wolfish face was before his eyes. It seemed to me that Dumpy was a man in a nightmare. He was climbing in as the girl, her lips parted in startled surprise, came around the ship. Her wide eyes showed considerable fear, and her face was like chalk.

Penoch greeted her with a smiling nod as Dumpy jazzed the gun savagely. "Climb in, fair lady," O'Reilly yelled with a grin, and there was no trace of the emotions he had been registering a moment before. As for me—I pinched myself prayerfully and inquired of myself whether I was going completely cuckoo. However, I'd soon find out.

Penoch and I wired the two suitcases on the wings, snug up to the fuselage. Kennard and Gray rode into the field just as Dumpy, goggles and helmet masking all expression on his face, took off. Outside of one quick glance at his passenger to make sure she was ready, he had not raised his eyes from his instrument board. Not a word or a gesture of farewell to us. He didn't even give the girl a chance to say good-by to her brother. He had all the aspect of a young man who's suddenly been dealt a paralyzing blow.

KENNARD and Gray rode alongside the other ship, and the captain seemed to be describing its details to the Californian. So I seized my chance.

"Penoch," I said as quietly as I could, "there's considerable excess mystery around here. And I crave to be in on it. It's not plain curiosity alone, either. You're new to us all, and anything official in it should be told. Get me? Or was it just part of a fight between two beaus, who don't like each other?"

In his characteristic stance, with legs wide apart, he was looking at the ground. When he looked up I glimpsed, for just a moment, a new O'Reilly. I'll swear there was utter misery in his eyes, and a drawn look on his face. It was evidence that he really did have the feelings of a human being, and was not just the little machine which he seemed outwardly to be. Up to that moment any association of softheartedness in connection with him had been out of the question. Even his amorous warning to Ann Gray had been like the burlesque of some diabolical little joker. He seemed to be hesitating about what to do. It was plain to me that he desired to confide in me—and yet some irresistible force dammed his attempts to speak. For the moment he seemed really whipped, psychologically speaking, as he allowed me to probe into his eyes, expressive for the first time.

"Give me a little more time, Slim," he begged. "I'm sort of scrambled in my mind, and I don't want to talk out of turn. You can't ask me to. The reasons I have may be personal—but if they are, there are others who ought to be damn thankful!"

And while I was making up my mind that I'd keep my eyes wide open for a number of things, I was trying to keep from allowing my thoughts to roam where they wanted to. My mental condition may be surmised when I tell you that the border patrolmen were in no different circumstances than many other officials. Temptations, sometimes almost irresistible if you figure that every man has his price, came their way.

THE next week was an unpleasant one. As quietly as possible, all the forces of the law were working and watching. Double murder of government men did not happen without cognizance, considerable cognizance, being taken thereof by the country at large, Texas in general, and the border in particular. Every border patrol post was heavily guarded night and day against the possibility of airplanes being stolen. Agents were at work quietly trying to discover the hiding-place of Von Sternberg in Mexico. The Grays had been proven to be exactly what they had said they were in California, and the patrol, aside from flying almost night and day, marked time and waited for Gray's trap for Von Sternberg to function.

All this was nerve-racking to flyers with fury in their hearts and revenge on their minds, but that was not the main trouble with the McMullenites. They had two troubles. One was Penoch O'Reilly and the other Dumpy Scarth. The hatred between the two was enough to spoil a far larger organization than the little cluster of men who lived in close contact out in the mesquite. O'Reilly was quieter about it. But the feeling was there. Dumpy Scarth rubbed him the wrong way every time he opened his mouth, and Penoch was not backward about saying so. And Dumpy's mouth was open longer and more frequently than ever. They had three fights during that week, when the raging Scarth lost hold of himself under the sting of Penoch's incessant command to quit talking about himself. In every one Penoch, a devastating chunk of human dynamite, thoroughly licked the indomitable Scarth, who came back for more as long as he could stand. O'Reilly was savagely contemptuous of Dumpy and all his works. Scarth hated O'Reilly with a truly murderous feeling that made one creeps to watch. Gone was the devil-may-care, boyishly naive braggart whose quick tempers were as quickly over and meant nothing. Dumpy was a vindictive man and a man, unless I was wrong, with a shadow hanging over him like a constant terror.

Patrol ships stopped frequently at the Gray home, and Dumpy was the most frequent caller. Penoch came next. They were fighting for Ann Gray, no doubt—and Penoch was a bad second. But that rivalry, to my mind, did not explain O'Reilly's attitude. It did account for Dumpy up to a certain point.

BUT there was something transcending that. O'Reilly was his master, in the sense that a cow-puncher riding a horse which always fights back until exhausted, is a master. And that goes from a mental as well as a physical point of view. Sometimes I thought of that puncher simile in another way too. It was as though O'Reilly was deliberately trying to break Scarth's spirit. He battered continuously and savagely at Dumpy, wearing that raving lunatic's resistance down. To make him confess something, perhaps?

It extended even to flying. We had been given one little S. E. 5 scout ship which was a darb for stunting. Dumpy took it up as often as he could, got high with it, and stunted wildly for the delectation of the entire city of McMullen and his fellow flyers. Not once did he come down from one of those flights that O'Reilly did not take it up immediately afterward. I'm not saying that Penoch was a better all-round pilot than Dumpy. But when it came to handling a single-seater in aerial maneuvers of a complicated nature I'll stand up and swear in any court that P. Enoch O'Reilly was one of the great stunt pilots of the world.

Even the flyers gaped in dumbfounded admiration. Upside down flying he could perform as though flying right side up. I've seen him start at five thousand feet, on his back, and do a barrel roll, finishing upside down, coming up out of the dugout another loop, doing a roll and a half, mind you, which finished him right side up, and then, with a reasonably fresh breeze, bring the S. E. down in a two thousand foot stall which was as close to imitating an elevator as I've ever seen. At other times he'd start high, and do a continuous succession of stunts on the way down. Each merged into the other without a break, and in two minutes he'd performed every stunt known to flying and some, I verily believe, which no man but George [illegible] had ever done before.

O'Reilly's flights, made without comment of any kind, were obviously a contemptuous gesture of superiority at Scarth. Finally when Dumpy, truly a wild man as he saw his one cherished excuse for eminence slipping away from him, started going wild close to the ground, flying through a hangar and that stuff, the captain firmly forbid either one to fly the S. E. until further notice. It was inevitable that Dumpy would kill himself if he kept on.

AND all of us grew sorry for the fat little beggar, pursued to desperation by his machinelike Nemesis. By the same token, Penoch was put down as a poor egg to have around. We didn't interfere, any of us—it was their own business. But the boys began to squirm with pity for the under dog as Penoch flayed him mercilessly. Only I realized that there was a reason for it which no one else knew. But sometimes, when Dumpy reminded me of a panic-stricken, bewildered beast throwing himself against the bars of its cage, I felt as though everybody would go crazy before the climax came. Which climax, thank whatever gods there be, was not far away.

Finally, with great unexpectedness, it was announced that Dumpy was taking a week's leave. Inasmuch as we were flying an average of five hours a day apiece, with every one's nerves getting more and more on edge from overwork, this announcement was somewhat of a mystery. I figured that it was the C. O.'s idea. He wanted to part Dumpy and O'Reilly.

When Dumpy announced triumphantly, shooting a glance full of vindictive triumph at O'Reilly, that he was spending his leave with the Grays, I saw O'Reilly sort of freeze into a statue. His battered face was a study, and his eyes were like gimlets, boring into Dumpy's very soul.

"I suppose," he boomed, "that you'll keep watch for us in case Von Sternberg turns up."

Dumpy nodded. He was really incapable of a civil word to O'Reilly.

"I'll be down often to help you," announced O'Reilly.

Dumpy turned and left the mess-hall without a word. And Jimmy Jennings, a highly keyed-up character anyway, burst into speech.

"For God's sake, O'Reilly, can't you leave him alone even down there?" he flared.

walls of the room. The Grays kept their eyes on him almost continually. Gerald, more urbane and polished and handsome than ever in his conventional clothing, was a real touch of class to the occasion.

As dinner was ending he said suddenly: "I'd like to see you, Sheriff, the Captain, and O'Reilly and Evans. I'd include Bob, but Ann will take care of him."

Neither objected, so we gathered in the captain's office, followed by the alertly interested gaze of the other flyers. Tex MacDowell's gray eyes glowed with the light I knew so well. And he had a nose for excitement which was the most delicate and infallible I've ever known.

"I've heard from, and talked to, Von Sternberg," Gray said abruptly.

That got the kind of attention from his audience that actors dream about.

"My place, it seems, is on a direct air-line between Von Sternberg's base in Mexico and San Antonio—or the vicinity of San Antonio. Von Sternberg knows that we are friendly with you flyers. He made no offer, definite offer, that I join him, although he was much interested in the plane I have ordered.

"To make a long story short, he's coming through by air on next Saturday night. Why by air, he didn't say. You can surmise. Being Von Sternberg, with the nerve of the devil himself, and figuring that I'd keep my mouth shut, he simply put the proposition cold. It was for me to see to it that no flyer or flyers were at my house for the week-end. If by any chance there should be, I'm to see to it that the flyer is very sound asleep when he passes over. Drug you—that is. I say—I don't know whether he will fly personally or not.

"I didn't dare ask him about the murder. I did hint, in a jovial way, at the ship stolen from Laredo. He merely grinned that deceiving grin of his, which'd make you believe he was an ingenuous college boy, and said the smaller one's investment is the greater the profits.

"He doesn't want to make a big circle around my place—matter of figuring his gasoline supply, I think."

PENOCH'S head was thrust forward in the characteristic position, but he said not a word while Kennard and the sheriff talked in terse sentences. I, for a wonder, said nothing either. I was in too much of a mental tailspin.

Finally Kennard summed it up. "Tomorrow we'll borrow an MB and a Briston from Donovan Field. They're both capable of a hundred fifty miles an hour. We'll hide 'em down at your place. And wait for him, as you say. Your suggestion that there might be more than one ship is a possibility. And Laredo and McMullen will be ready to take the air at any time we get the word."

"And please remember this," Gray said quietly, but his eyes were shot with red and his face was strained. "You don't know Von Sternberg—but I do. You realize my position. I hate to ask it, but will you try, in your conversation and such other ways as may be necessary, to protect me as far as possible?

"I'm going to send Ann to San Antone for a while to get her away from possible trouble. Besides, she's been having twinges of appendicitis for some time, and she can be operated on. I'll use that as an excuse."

"You can depend on us," Kennard said crisply.

Gray, shooting a curious glance at the half-crouched O'Reilly, went out.

"Captain," O'Reilly said slowly, "I want to ask a very presumptuous thing. I want you to assign Dumpy Scarth, Slim and myself to those ships."

"Why?"

Penoch hesitated, staring into the captain's eyes as though on the verge of saying something vitally important.

Because I'd served under the captain for years, I put in my oar.

"Captain Kennard, I'm sure you'll believe me—and believe that my judgment isn't so rotten and that if I'm mysterious I have damn good reasons for being so. As an individual favor for me, which may lead to—to something very important, will you do what Penoch says?"

Sheriff Trowbridge's puckered eyes were surveying me keenly, as he pulled his mustache. Kennard gazed long and hard into my eyes. Then, because he was the kind of a man he was, he said crisply:

"All right, I'm completely at sea, but if there's something you don't want to confide in me, yet, I can appreciate it."

The dance was a huge success, and Ann was the queen of the May, Dumpy's face shining with happiness, was like a glowing, red-faced kewpie.

I do not fling a wicked foot, so I foregathered, as is my custom, with a few cronies near the bar. And we laughed until four o'clock in the morning at Percival Enoch O'Reilly. The little twospot picked for partners all the stout old better halves of the McMullen oldtimers, and he swung those dreadnaughts about hilariously. He danced 'em right into the ground. Sometimes it was hard to spot him, and then he'd emerge from the tangle of amply swinging skirts, his head barely to his partner's shoulder, his arm going one quarter of the way around her, and with elfin face shining go into more complicated evolutions.

The crowd was going at four in the morning, and I was preparing to retire. We were to haul off for San Antone before noon, and grab those three fighting scout ships. Suddenly there seemed to be excitement in the rear end of the hangar. Penoch O'Reilly and I rushed over.

It was Ann. She'd fainted. As Major Searles, our weazened old flight surgeon, had her carried to a tent and started to revive her Penoch and I were right on the trail, along with Dumpy and Gerald.

She came to quickly, and sort of grabbed her side.

"I knew it!" exploded Gerald.

Dumpy's face was pitiful to see as he begged to know what. He was sure a lovelorn kid.

"That damn appendicitis!" grated her brother. "Let's go out and give the doctor a chance."

We heard Ann talking faintly, and in a moment the doctor came out. He glanced at the sky.

"No need of an examination, from what you've both told me," the little major said hurriedly. "She must be operated on as soon as is humanly possible.

"Mr. Gray, I'd advise you to have her taken to a hospital in San Antonio. She can be flown up there in two hours and a half. Here in McMullen you wouldn't find expert attention. It will be drawn in a few moments."

"Dumpy, take him to see the captain about it, Penoch said suddenly, and the dazed Dumpy, as though unmindful of who was speaking, obeyed.

O'Reilly whirled on me.

"Slim, come with me," he whispered. "I want to examine their baggage!"

For a long moment we looked at each other, and without a word we knew a part of what each one of us had been thinking.

"Information or no information, I want to know!" he said in that hoarse whisper. "Come on!"

IN A moment we were in my battered car, and flying toward McMullen. Not a word did we speak. Then:

"The minute she got sick and I got close to her I grabbed some keys from her pocketbook," he told me calmly. "I think I'm wrong, but I'll never be comfortable until I know!"

Even under the circumstances I threw back my head and laughed. To think of that cast-iron little squirt stealing keys while a girl was as sick as Ann somehow seemed humorous to me. Penoch was indeed a business man.

They were occupying the two rooms which the flight rented by the month in the hotel, for casual guests. It was no trick to get the key, and in two minutes we were in Gray's room. There was but one suitcase there—open. We tore into Ann's room, and there were two suitcases, locked, and one open.

Working with silent speed, not wasting movement, Penoch had the first one open in a few seconds.

"Look at it," he whispered, and started work on the second. He had it open as I was poking into the top layer of clothing. A muttered "God!" passed his lips as my own tongue worked convulsively in an effort at speech. Spread before us in the two suitcases there was at least twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of dope, neatly put up in small packages easily opened. My eyes met his—and they were alight with a wintry, savage glow which made them shine like an animal's at night.

He snapped one suitcase shut. "Let's get out of here!" he whispered hoarsely.

HE ASKED my permission to drive back, which I gave him. He must have thought he was contesting for the Vanderbilt Cup. That veteran vehicle of mine ran faster than the makers thereof had intended it to go when in top condition. Penoch skirted holes in the road and hurtled over thank-you-ma'ams like a man possessed.

Our fragmentary conversation was sufficient, however, to enable us to agree on deductions, methods, future plans. All would have been pleasant anticipation save for one thing: Dumpy Scarth.

"I'll tell you who comes in it," O'Reilly roared at me above the wheel. "Here comes a car. They're bound to town for that baggage."

Providentially there was a side road—just an alley—and we drove up that while the other car went by. It wasn't of vast importance, but it would be just as well if Gray didn't know that Penoch and I were driving home from an unexpected trip to town.

Out at the airdrome a hundred or so people were standing around, waiting to see the takeoff. Two ships were on the line, spitting fire from their exhausts as sleepy mechanics warmed them up.

In a moment Penoch had collected Captain Kennard and the huge old sheriff. The quartette of us foregathered in Kennard's office. O'Reilly was a bundle of irresistible energy—he gave the impression of a man who was white hot inside, and controlling himself with an effort.

"SHOOT!" commanded the captain, and I let Penoch do the shooting.

In two sentences he told what we'd found. Kennard's stocky body stiffened and his gray eyes widened in utter amazement. Trowbridge clawed at his sweeping mustache, and his eyes were bright slits in his lined old face.

"How come?" he boomed, and in a hoarse stage whisper Penoch shot the works.

"When I went after that masked bandit we'd shot down, he was more or less delirious. I listened to his talk. For a minute or so before he died he seemed to be half sane. I fired questions at him, mentioning the Grays, and Von Sternberg. No need of taking up time trying to recall things exactly. This guy made me think he worked for Von Sternberg's gang. And that the Grays were in some way connected with operations. This bird thought, I imagine, that he'd been doublecrossed—that Gray had given the tipoff to us. It wasn't definite, any of it, but his rambling conversation just gave me possible lines to work on.

"And, most important, when he saw me first his eyes got big and he said 'Senor Scarth?' "

O'Reilly stopped a moment, and no one offered to talk. So that was it. Scarth had been mentioned by this outlaw whom he'd never seen—

"And when I shook my head," O'Reilly drove on, "This gink, sinking fast, grinned a mean sort of grin, said something sarcastic about the border patrol being honest men, asked where Dumpy was, and then started a crazy raving fit wherein he cursed the Grays, and frothed at the mouth in general.

"Right then I decided that there might be something a bit peculiar smelling in the woodpile. I figured that Von Sternberg had been talking, perhaps, about the Grays joining him, as per Jerry's story. I couldn't get the Dumpy Scarth thing out of my noodle, however. Why he should be mentioned with a sneering grin, and that sarcastic stuff pulled about the honesty of the border patrol."

HE STOPPED again, his eyes flashing from face to face. We stood like statues, and I saw Kennard's face almost aging before my eyes. The lines were deeper, the eyes terrible. Trowbridge wasn't smiling now—he was leaning forward like some fierce old eagle watching hungrily for its prey.

"I couldn't shoot off my mouth," Penoch went on. His stunted body was erect, those pillar-like legs widespread, mustache and hair disheveled. "I just watched, suspecting everybody and yet not really believing anything, you understand. I tried to sneak in a private word or so with Scarth, and the damn fool is too bull-headed to even try to clear himself. He just wouldn't say a courteous word to me.

"Then, after he'd wrecked his plane through plain damn foolishness along the river, accidentally knocking himself out too, I figured that a border flyer who'd take chances stunting when important duty was five minutes ahead was either unfit for duty because he didn't have sense enough or maybe unfit because he hadn't wanted those bandits caught. Next morning, when that telephone call came and the project of flying Gray to San Antone hove over the horizon, I got a freakish idea.

"I got it, I presume, because the audacity and grim humor and utter daring of this Von Sternberg. Some of his biggest jobs are jokes that even the victim has to laugh over. Anyway, it tickled me to construct the proposition. Wouldn't it be a laugh, I figured, if a couple of smugglers, knowing how tough it is to get the stuff north on the ground, should get friendly with the border boys, get a few trips north on various excuses, finally get a ship of their own and have a border man fly it, and all the time have border patrolmen carrying dope for 'em, innocently?

"Then the Dumpy thing came up in my mind. Suppose Dumpy had been corrupted some way? Slim, here, caught us just before that first trip started. I wanted Dumpy to give me a shot at examining the bags quickly, and he refused, all swollen up like a poisoned pup. Then I wanted him to see what he could find out by following her up in San Antone, and he started to lick me and shoot off his mouth kid fashion.

"For various reasons, I didn't want to confide in any one. You can realize some of 'em. It sounded far-fetched for one thing, and the Grays—

"To make a long story short, Dumpy Scarth has acted exactly as he would act if he had full knowledge of what the Grays were up to. Except for one thing. That is that he should have figured that I suspected something, and in that case would have warned 'em to lay off. His actions, plus the mysterious words of that Spig, make it look black for Dumpy to me. That angle of continuing the attempts at dope running is the only excuse for him. "But remember that even if he is innocent, he's a damn poor border patrolman to act as he has!"

"We'll soon find that out!" grated Kennard, and made a leap for the door.

THE three of us, silent as the grave, heard him bawl an order to some one to find Dumpy and bring him here. It was dawn, now, and the low drone of the two motors was the only audible sound.

When Kennard came back I took a hand.

"Our idea was to let the trip go through," I told him. "Penoch and I suspected that this sickness was merely another good excuse for a trip under government auspices. We could get the Department of Justice on the job in San Antonio, have Ann shadowed, find out who buys the stuff and be all ready to rope in the whole gang whenever we're ready."

"While we get Von Sternberg," O'Reilly put in.

"How?" boomed the sheriff.

"My idea about the whole thing is this," I told them swiftly. "Penoch's and mine, that is. It would be characteristic of this unknown, anyhow. The Grays are his accomplices, and planned to ingratiate themselves with the patrol somehow and work as they now work, getting the dope north. However, Von Sternberg wanted to steal a ship. Gates was inveigled into landing. Probably by the Grays themselves, for that matter. They were in on it. Von Sternberg was there. Then plans went wrong because Gates and Baker got wise and fought. Gates was killed. Baker escaped, and was tracked and killed to keep his mouth shut about Gray.

"Here's where the lovely audacity comes in. They fitted their plans to the disaster right away. Gray, telling part of the truth, got in with us by mentioning his boss and telling the truth about him. Or part of it. Von Sternberg, according to Penoch, is so firmly enthroned in Mexico, where the Germans stand ace high anyway, that he didn't give a damn about his name being mentioned, and it set the Grays right with us as nothing else could have done. Took us in completely, because it was based on fact.

"Now Penoch has an idea that Gray senses his suspicions. Possibly that we're all restive. So, if he's going to keep his unassailable position in our minds, he may have figured he'd have to make good some way.

"We think that on Saturday night there *will* something happen. Maybe a ship—the stolen one—come over and shoot right back across the border. Just enough to prove Gray's good faith, but with no chance of being caught. We'd figure he'd been scared back, but we'd also be sure Gray was on the level, and any suspicion we might have had would disappear.

"We though it would be a great idea to let the Grays think they're getting away in fine style, go down there as scheduled, and see what we can see. God knows what will happen, but we might land Von Sternberg."

"If a ship comes over, he'll be in it," O'Reilly said positively. "He's the kind of a devil that would love to swoop down and thumb his nose at the American Air Service, so to speak, kid 'em along. There's one ruling passion in his life. That's to belittle America, and his ambition is to be a wild hair in the beard of Uncle Sam. The war isn't over for him. But he does it with a sort of sardonic grin, if you get me. Why, down around Tampico he never did a dirty trick to any but American companies—that's why he's ace high in Mexico. I shouldn't be surprised if many a high ranking Jefe down there chuckled over everything Von Sternberg does to show his contempt for America and Americans—"

"WANT me, Cap'n?" came Dumpy's voice, and the fat flyer bustles in sweating profusely. "My God, we ought to get started. Poor Ann—"

"Sit down, boy," boomed the sheriff, and the kindly old man's eyes were almost moist.

Dumpy looked around the circle with growing discomfort.

"What the hell is the wake about?" he demanded loudly, but he sat down.

"Dumpy, did you ever see either of the Grays before the day Bert Gates was killed?" rasped the Captain.

Penoch O'Reilly was standing almost over Dumpy, head forward, as though to force Dumpy into confession by sheer power of will. Dumpy's eyes left the captain's grim face, and rested on O'Reilly. There was a nasty sneer on his fat face as he spat:

"No, sir! O'Reilly been talking, has he?"

"Never mind. Dumpy, we just went down to the hotel and found out something about the Grays. About their baggage."

Every eye was on him, but he did not shrink.

"Huh?" he grunted. "What?"

"Ann Gray's suitcases were filled with dope!" Kennard said slowly, and he ran his hands through his scrubby pompadour as though unable to keep still. But his eyes never left Dumpy's face.

And my heart did seven flip-flops of joy, and I felt like jumping up and clicking my heels together in goatish abandon. For no actor who ever lived could have faked what was apparent on Dumpy's moon-like countenance.

His jaw dropped, his eyes widened, his face paled. He was utterly stupefied—so much so that for the moment I don't believe he could comprehend the implications in the captain's words. He gaped like a fish out of water, struggling to speak.

Penoch O'Reilly relaxed with a long sigh. A grin flitted over that battered, sparkling, ridiculously contradictory face of his. "My error!" he announced snappily. "I guess they made a careful survey of the border and picked Dumpy as the easiest prey for Ann Gray's wiles. He was to be their man Friday, not knowing what he was doing, and jump when they cracked the whip. Damned if they weren't willing to marry the pair off just to make sure of a tractable pilot who wouldn't suspect anything!"

That was it, I decided instantly. Dumpy had been picked as the leading sacrifice, long before the scheme had got under way.

Suddenly, with that shadow of possible corruption among us dispelled, the air was electric. Matters of interest and import lay ahead. I felt five years younger, and the old sheriff began pacing the floor. We forgot Dumpy, for a second.

Then he came to himself. As he leaped to his feet I just froze into a statue. Never have I seen such utter misery on the face of a human being before. His anguished eyes were beseeching as he put his arm on the captain's arm.

"It isn't true, Cap'n!" he raved. "It can't be! Isn't this joke? I—"

"Sit down, Dumpy," the captain said with unwonted softness in his voice.

FOR ten minutes we sort of labored with the heart-broken kid. Then the captain, in no uncertain terms, retold the yarn and showed Dumpy just what kind of a stubborn—almost treasonably stubborn—fool he'd been.

Penoch O'Reilly, firmly planted on his short legs, stood like some silent, sardonic demon, reminding the tortured Scarth of his downfall.

It wasn't pleasant for me to watch. I knew what I was seeing, and it had never before happened to the indomitable Dumpy. For I was looking at a man who was whipped—utterly, completely, thoroughly whipped. The errors into which he had been led by an adventuress, his own conceit, and his hatred for Penoch O'Reilly were laid bare before him. His romance was shattered, and utter disillusion was the residue. And before him stood the man who had, in his own words, outthought him, outfought him, outflown him. Dumpy's high estate as a border flyer was no more. All that made life worth while for him had been swept away.

And the man who no peril of the air could daunt, whose spirit had never been broken, whose serene belief in himself and his ability had never wavered, was now a broken thing.

I hoped to God that it would not last. Often, in the case of a man of Dumpy's egotistical type, a lesson harsh enough to really mean something is a lesson so cruel that it breaks him. I felt that there was more of a chance of killing than curing.

He was a pale, haggard-faced, tragic-eyed wreck of the man he had been two weeks before when we'd finished.

TIME was getting very short, so Captain Kennard, with Trowbridge chipping in, outlined his plans quickly. Dumpy sat and listened, and I had the feeling that he did not hear a word that was said, although the scheme included, of course, his continuance in the rôle of Ann's affectionate fiancé for a few more days. We were to go through with the trip to San Antonio, Dumpy flying her and Penoch and I riding together. Then we were to bring back the faster ships from Donovan.

It looked reasonably good. No sooner had the captain finished than Dumpy stumbled to his feet. His face was working a bit, his eyes like those of a suffering, bewildered dog.

"I'll go the limit," he said slowly, as though to himself. "Anything you say. I'm just a—a false alarm, with no business on the border. I gummed up that business of catching the whole bunch of bandits because I was a blind, fat-headed fool. I fought O'Reilly because I was scared in my heart that there was one chance in a million he might be right. No, by God, that wasn't it! It was because I hated him for no reason, and was such a fool about—Ann—that I couldn't do my duty where she was concerned. "I—I'm sorry. O'Reilly, I was wrong on every count. You've put it over me—good. I'll try to make up for it—"

He turned blindly, and shuffled toward the door. Little O'Reilly leaped forward. He showed no emotion whatsoever in his twinkling face and cool blue eyes. He was as matter-of-fact as though mention the fact that dawn was upon us.

"That's all right, Dumpy," he boomed. "How about shaking, calling quits, and combining to get even?"

Dumpy shook with him, but his eyes could not meet those of his Nemesis. He shuffled out, as though he wanted nothing but to be alone with himself. No one else could help to heal the hurts of his spirit then.

THE witching hour of midnight, on the ensuing Saturday, and three flyers were scanning the moonlit sky with night-glasses. One flyer, being myself, felt his heart pound considerably. Another, meaning Dumpy Scarth, was white-faced and blazing-eyed. There was something in those wide orbs of his which gave me a curiously uncomfortable feeling. It was as though he was seeing visions beyond our ken, almost. Percival Enoch O'Reilly showed no particular signs of the strain. Perhaps those light eyebrows and mustaches seemed to bristle a bit more, and his blue eyes to sparkle with a little more life, but otherwise he was strictly business. He was on a job, and took it as a matter of course.

The two ships, mechanics stationed at the propellers, were in a shed, out of sight of a flyer in the air. At the moment Ann Gray was in the house, but Gerald was sitting quietly on the ground, a few feet from us. He did not know that a trusty posse of Sheriff Trowbridge's, reinforced by three rangers and several customs men, were lurking all around his estate—in particular at intervals of a few hundred feet along the river.

The wonder in our hearts was not whether anything would happen or not. We were convinced that something would, in order to keep the Grays in the good graces of the patrol, and make our trust of them absolute. That having been decided, the point of issue was to figure exactly the method Von Sternberg would use to back up Gray's information, and yet to escape unscathed himself.

It had been a long drawn out three days, although the machinery we'd set up had worked beautifully. Federal agents had full knowledge of the San Antonio distributors to whom the suitcase of stuff had been delivered, and those gentry were being most efficiently watched. The contraband was now being traced north, and at the terminus of its travels the recipients would be under the scrutiny of Uncle Sam and find it difficult to escape it henceforth. In a day or two the government agents expected to sweep down on a very large and smooth-working ring.

During our two day stay at the Gray ranch I had made a few second guesses about the cultivated Mr. Gray and his supposed half-sister. One was that they were, themselves, users of poppy-fruit. The other was that I could see in the beauty of Ann Gray, now, a certain diamond-like hardness, and, occasionally, the real sophistication of her shining through her well taken pose of refinement and girlish sincerity. Both of them were excellent actors. Our guess was that they had become entangled with the dope around Tia Juana or Hollywood, and had finally gone into the business as a sort of final downward step in their careers. Possibly Von Sternberg did have something on Gray and had forced him into the game.

The audacity of their methods was such that Penoch was positive Von Sternberg was the leading spirit of it.

"I didn't tell the complete truth when I said that I didn't actually know him personally," he had confessed to me. "I do—slightly. We tangled once—a little affair I don't like to mention. But every detail of this line-up here smacks of him. If he puts anything over, he's the kind who'd enjoy sending the Air Service a sarcastic letter about it—get the point? He's chuckling now, I'll bet—and I'm going crazy waiting to see what he's up to. Probably just a scoot across the river and back to give us a thrill—but maybe more. And in an airplane that gink would just slap the face of all the law there is in the world!"

It had been rather a tense period, at the Grays, for another reason. We had to watch him like a hawk, of course, although there seemed little danger of foul play as long as they didn't realize that we were wise to them. Dumpy, more than any one, helped us out there. He was as good an actor as the Grays. Not once, around them, did he give the slightest indication of the fact that his heart was ashes within him, and the spark of youthful delight in his life and work gone out. But when he was alone he slumped, and no efforts of Penoch's or mine could hearten him. He was too naive and transparently sincere to hide it. He was a silent, hollow-eyed, tragic figure of a king who'd lost his power, and with it his interest in life. And I know he felt that he'd lost it to Penoch. No longer could Dumpy think of himself as the perfect border patrolman—star of the outfit. Another man had showed him up, at every turn, and topped it by almost contemptuously saving his life in a manner that had already sped through the Air Service. Add to all that the numbing realization of his own criminal negligence—and you have a man going through hell with no exit in sight.

And it was a cross section of hell to realize that, for me.

THESE things, and many more, were burning in my brain as we waited there in the pungent border night, silently, because Gray was close and casual conversation which he might understand did not appeal to us at the moment. Suddenly however, O'Reilly shattered the night with loud brays of laughter.

"Reminds me of one time in France when I watched the sky like this and went up and fought Dink Groves, of my own squadron, for damn near ten minutes and he put a bullet in my gas-tank and I came near burning up! Ho, ho, ho! Talk about a jackass!"

"Look!" It was a cry from Gray, and something in the timbre of his voice gave me all the evidence I needed to determine that Mr. Gerald Gray was strained to the limit. He was no cold, iron-nerved outlaw, but a highly nervous one.

In a few seconds we picked up the ship as the roar grew louder and tiny pinpricks of fire appeared in the sky over Mexico. About five thousand feet high, I figured.

As our ships barked into life I was suffering with chills and fever. Had Gray succeeded in getting word to Von Sternberg that we had two fast and powerful ships to overcome that DeHaviland? If he knew it, what did he intend to do? Would we scare him off too soon?

Dumpy had the MB, a one-seated fighter that would run up more than a hundred and fifty miles an hour and climb like a shot from a howitzer. Penoch and I were in the light, fast little Briston, capable of close to a hundred and fifty with its Liberty wide open.

Dumpy's three hundred horsepower motor roared across the ground. He took the air in a breath taking zoom that carried him close to a thousand feet. We must both get off the ground now without bothering for warmups—that ship high in the sky was now a mile into American territory, and we dared not lose sight of it. Of course the unknown pilot was watching the ground—could either of us catch him before he got back over Mexican soil? Dumpy, maybe, could get close enough for a shot.

We were on the way, Penoch at the stick in the front cockpit. We'd tossed to see who'd fly, and he'd won. I was standing in the rear, my observer's belt around me and my hands on the double Lewis, all ready. I never took my eyes from that other ship. It had sounded like a Liberty motor, and its dark shape loomed against the moon like that of a DeHaviland. Doubtless our stolen ship.

It did not turn around. My mind was working like mad, following a hundred possible trails like a hound casting around for a lost scent. It was unbelievable that the pilot was not aware that ships had taken off from Gray's pasture. Could he be utter lunatic enough to attempt to go on to San Antone? Possibly, if he figured that we, too, had only DeHavilands, but it seemed entirely improbable. Not even the fabled Von Sternberg could figure on deliberately tipping us off that an illegal flight was to be made, and then go through with it on schedule.

Dumpy was about three thousand feet below him, and not far back, as nearly as I could tell. We were a full half-mile back of him, and climbing very slowly so that our forward speed would be as great as possible.

Leaning against the terrific air-stream which seemed to be trying to tear them from me, I clamped the night-glasses to my eyes. A second later I saw the D. H. turn westward, and in ever so slight a dive hurl itself along parallel to the line of the river.

Penoch swept our ship about in a vertical bank which nearly hurled me out of the cockpit. The tactics of our prey was puzzling me more and more. Why on earth had that ship gone a full ten miles over the United States, and only now be trying to back track to Mexico and safety? It would have been enough, surely, to flash over the Gray farm, turn as we got into the air, and laugh its way back over the river while we were still helpless, a couple of thousand feet below.

ON IT went, and now it was angling toward the river. Dumpy was climbing slowly, still a good distance lower than the De Haviland. And the D. H., flying level, had almost, if not quite as much speed as the climbing scout. There was a good chance of the D. H. getting away before Dumpy came near enough for a good shot. We, too, were forced to keep climbing, this cutting down our speed, but we had the shortest distance to cover and there was more than an even chance that the fugitive ship could be cut off by us if Dumpy failed.

On we roared, while I turned into a nervous wreck as I felt more and more certain that whoever was in that D. H. was laughing at us. The silver sea of mesquite flowed along beneath us, and the river was in sight. We were angling toward it now as the wide open motor seemed to be straining every nerve like some living pursuer.

We were less than a mile from the river, the D. H. possibly two miles, and Dumpy, now within less than a thousand feet of the D. H.'s altitude, was between us. All three ships were flying on converging courses which would meet close to the Rio Grande.

Subconsciously, I remembered that by now the Grays would be in custody; that a moment or two more would see us in battle; that the Briston was still far too low to fight efficiently. Dumpy might get that fleeing bomber—if it was Von Sternberg it would be a good fight——

In an instant my mind sort of opened up to a dazzling thought. The association of Von Sternberg's name did it, I guess. I was leaning over into the front cockpit, and one hand gripped O'Reilly as the other hauled back on the throttle. A second later the whine of the wires shrilled through the shocking stillness of the night, and I was yelling into Penoch's ear.

"That ship may be a decoy!" I bellowed. "Acts to me like it was just getting us out of the way! Another ship might be coming over with a big cargo—"

"Just like Von Sternberg!" came that foghorn roar of O'Reilly's, and he did a reenversement which nearly broke my neck.

In a second or two we were roaring eastward along the river, straining every nerve to get back to the Gray farm. Dumpy, with that scout, should be more than a match for the comparatively slow and clumsy D. H., if he caught it. The bomber was diving now, and while that sacrificed altitude, it gained speed, and no pilot in a D. H. wanted to fight a scout. He wanted to get away.

I don't know why I was so sure that the plane we'd followed had been a decoy. It seemed a workable and characteristic plan, that was all. Another ship, flying high as we were drawn ten or fifteen miles westward could get through, possibly without being spotted at all by any one on the ground. And if so, the ship doubtless would cross in the neighborhood of the Gray place, for that matter of gas and oil which Gray himself had mentioned was a serious one and he was probably telling the truth about the necessity of the air course leading close to his ranch.

Down below was the place. Lights were gleaming from the windows.

"They're not feeling so good down there, I don't suppose," I told myself absently as my eyes searched the sky.

Men were popping out of the house, now, looking up at us. We roared on eastward, climbing all the time. My legs were tired from bracing against the propeller stream, my face raw from the wind, and my eyes watering as the air whirled below my goggles despite all I could do.

Then I leaned forward and gave Penoch a belt on the back. Northward about five miles, and at least ten thousand feet high, what might be tiny stars winking tiny blue and yellow flames stabbed the light darkness. Penoch banked the ship, and we were flashing northward, climbing to the limit of our fleet ship's ability. Soon, through the glasses, I was sure of my ground.

For a brief moment I trained the binoculars westward. I was just in time to see a ball of fire, fully fifteen miles away, on the bank of the river. Was it the funeral pyre of Von Sternberg H or of Dumpy Scarth?

I did not inform Penoch of what I'd seen, and momentarily it was buried deep in my mind. For those ships beyond and a half mile above us were turning back toward the river. They, too, had been watchful, and knew that their northward flight would be abortive now.

Again the motor's roar died as I cut the throttle and yelled to O'Reilly.

"I'll climb!" he roared back at me.

There was not an instant of hesitancy nor the shadow of doubting timidity in that mighty bellow. To Penoch it was a matter of course that we attack the two planes now speeding back toward us as our ship climbed in huge circles. We must get as high as they were.

But we could not. They grew larger with amazing speed, like two messengers of fate. We were but a few hundred feet lower than they were when they had come within a quarter of a mile of us—but a few hundred feet means plenty in any combat.

And P. Enoch O'Reilly did not falter. For a second he dived, as though fleeing. Then the Briston came up smoothly—on up until it was standing on its tail. Then it started over on its back, and as it did so it slowly turned on its own axis. An Immelmann turn, and we had gained three hundred feet. Now we were pointed at them, head on, two hundred feet below them. They were five hundred feet apart, almost abreast, and diving in converging lines on us.

At that instant I remembered O'Reilly's war record. Never had he hesitated, no matter what the odds. Crouched over my guns, mentally kissing the world good-by, badly frightened, I nevertheless silently saluted the indomitable little man who was hurling us into an almost hopeless battle.

Suddenly our ship swerved, and went into a dive. Then Penoch banked swiftly. He was dodging as the enemy guns spit fire. Another bank, to the right then into a terrific dive. I hadn't had a shot yet. Now they were almost above us, and their angle for diving was such that they could not draw a bead on us for a second.

Again our ship swooped around, as though for a loop. And on top of the loop Penoch was shooting his forward guns. The shots drummed forth as we started down out of it. At the last minute he performed the Immelmann again, and at the bottom of our dive we were right side up, heading toward them.

The shots had not taken effect. And they were flyers, too. Again we were coming head on, and still they were slightly above us. Now they were headed north, and we south.

For a full minute we fought. I got in a few shots as the ship twisted and turned through the air like some great beast threshing in torture. Diving, zooming, banking, with the motor now roaring at terrific speed and again almost dying in a stall, Penoch fought his battle. Our wings were full of bullet holes, our prop off balance from a bullet. And still they had kept their advantage.

Twist and turn as we might, stealing a shot here and there, we could not gain a point on them.

Then, as they came at us from almost opposite sides and I was pumping lead into the nearest one it happened. With a shout of joy I saw my target waver in its dive, and the prop fly off. It banked steeply, and then went into a dive for the river.

"Got one!" I yelled hysterically—and just then Penoch banked to meet our other opponent.

But we never did. The ship quivered as though mortally hurt. Ahead of me Penoch was suddenly still in the cockpit. The windshield before him was shattered, and our motor cutting out badly. A shower of bullets had caught the fore part of our ship.

I grabbed the stick in the rear cockpit, and as the enemy plane flashed above us at right angles I sent the Briston into a steep dive. We were helpless and crippled, and must run for it.

For a moment it seemed that we had lost the ship. It circled, as though the two passengers could not pick us up in the gloom. Ahead of us the second ship was gliding for the ground. It was a shallow dive, too—they wanted to make the river, three miles away.

Then the effective plane spotted us. We were now about three thousand feet high, due to the terrific dive I had put the ship into. Our opponents were at least two thousand feet higher.

On they came. Their ship was nosed down into almost a nose dive as they came at us like a dropping eagle after a crippled rabbit.

Flying with the stick between my knees, my guns pointed backward, I waited, helpless. I'd pour bullets into their shielding radiator and motor, but it was just to sell our lives dearly. We'd got one——

THEN I let out a shout which almost was audible above the racing motor ahead of me. Coming down out of the sky like a meteor, angling from the west at our approaching enemy, came Dumpy Scarth and the tight little MB. God knows from what Olympian height he had dropped his ship, but his dive was a streak of fire athwart the sky. Could he get down in time to knock that ever-nearing enemy plane before it showered us with bullets?

Sitting there with my neck craned around, motionless as a statue, my mind too numb to be conscious of fear, I watched the race for my life.

Suddenly streaks of fire poured from that flashing scout's guns. Dumpy had started his spray of machine-gun fire, but he was still five hundred feet away—

Then my body slumped, and all I could do was think stupidly:

"That's every bit of it."

Possibly because of the wild dive stepping up the speed of motor and propeller to such an extreme, or possibly just because of failure in the synchronizing gears, Dumpy had shot off his own propellor.

It was all over. In a second I'd start shooting.

BUT a superman was at the stick of the MB that night—a man who had been turned into a being who could not turn back from the work he'd set himself, and felt no fear. The bragging youngster was a man who had suffered and was willing to give his life for one last moment of glorious proof, to himself and to the world, that he was worthy of a trust. Sometimes I think that he might have preferred, at that second, that he die.

For he never wavered. And just as our intent pursuer saw him, and banked to get out of the line of fire, Dumpy's propellerless ship dipped slightly. Never will there be a more perfect flying feat—never a more nervy one. Like a projectile the MB, traveling at more than two hundred miles an hour, dragged its undercarriage through that upturned wing. With the struts and wheels hanging in a splintered mass below the tiny ship, the MB gradually came level, and then went into a shallow dive toward the river while its victim, one upper wingtip smashed and the struts useless, dipped and slipped and dived helplessly for the ground.

No more did the mesquite below mean anything, nor my spitting, missing motor. A reprieve from death itself made a crash a minor thing. I watched the helpless struggling ship crash gently to the ground on its shattered wing, and then sent my Briston staggering toward the river with barely six cylinders working and a shallow dive necessary to keep flying speed. I saw Dumpy crash level into some trees, and the ship disappear below them. But a second later he was waving something white—he was alive.

The other enemy ship was on the ground. It had reached a clearing, and landed safely except for running into some mesquite after it had got its wheels down. It was telescoped, but two men were running the scant mile which separated them from the river.

They did not make it, however, for the McMullen ships came thundering down the river—three of them. Tex MacDowell circled me, and two or three significant gestures sent him after the fleeing men. Another ship circled Dumpy Scarth, a third accompanied me as I slipped and skidded and staggered through the air, pointing northward toward the wreck of the ship Dumpy had ruined.

I was trying to make the field, with my unconscious supercargo in the front. The motor spit and popped, and the ship was in a half-stall all the time as I tried to get along without flying speed. Every foot of altitude was more valuable than pearls—yea, than many fine rubies. I thought I was going to make it. At the very last moment, however, the ship settled on a mesquite tree which was the last obstacle before the field itself. The motor dragged through the branches, the front part of the ship hit the ground, not too hard, but it snapped my head forward against the cowling. Men were running toward me as I became completely null, and not a little void.

THE funny part of it is that I, suffering from an ordinary crack in the conk, took four hours to recover my senses, and when I did, in the Gray house, I was on the couch in the sitting-room and Penoch O'Reilly, the iron man, was in a chair with a bandage around the top of his bared shoulder and neck, and Dumpy was walking up and down. The other guests were Major Searles, our flight surgeon, Tex MacDowell, Captain Kennard, Sleepy Spears, and two observers, George Hickman and our baldheaded adjutant, Pop Cravath. Sheriff Trowbridge sat on a piano stool, like an elephant on the point of a pin.

Penoch saw my eyes open, and in a flash was over beside the couch while the others talked excitedly.

"Where are the thugs?" I asked as my senses snapped into place.

"All, including the Grays, being escorted to McMullen, whence they go to the San Antonio jail," came O'Reilly's voice in partially subdued tones. Then in a whisper: "They say Ann's language was far from pretty to hear. Two of the flyers—one American and one German—were hurt, but not badly, and it was decided that it wasn't safe to keep 'em here. Those ships held more than a hundred thousand dollars' worth of dope. Some haul, eh?" Not a one of the gang would open their mouths, either!"

Dumpy was talking, but at the moment Sheriff Trowbridge announced:

"Slim's woke up. How goes it, Slim?"

"Great," I answered, getting up into a sitting position. "Dumpy, I suppose you got Von Sternberg, according to that fire—or was it him?"

"Yes—but the hell I got him!" yapped Scarth. "A few hundred yards from the river, just as I had a bead on him, the son-of-a-gun jumps in a parachute! I couldn't shoot him in cold blood, and he slipped his chute right across the river with me circling him! And that —— —— —— was wriggling his fingers against his nose all the way down, kidding me! It must have been him—big and—"

"Sure it was!" boomed O'Reilly. "And if the government 'll give me the leave I got comin' to me I'm going to take a vacation and try to grab him for the fun of it—down in Mexico, as a vacation. This makes the second time I've run into him, and the second time I've generated a private grudge against him."

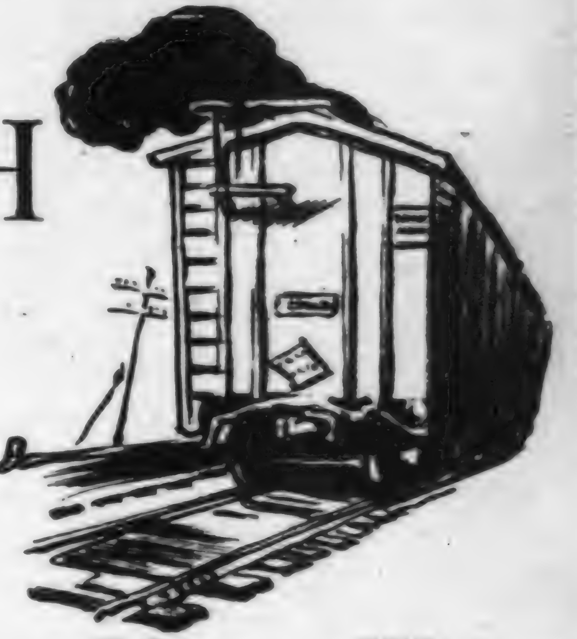
I sort of admired the bird who could thumb his nose under the circumstances, and I wondered why O'Reilly should have a personal feeling against him after the night's *soirée*. The first time, of course, was beyond my ken.

"So," continued O'Reilly, "If Slim here wants to get a leave and sort of horse around, we might generate something."

It was several days before I cornered Penoch and demanded: "When I caught you and Dumpy fighting that time over the baggage, why shouldn't you have stepped out and told me, at least, what you suspected was up, told it to me as a friend of Dumpy's and—"

"Because I was crazy!" he roared. "That Ann Gray girl—Gerald's sweetheart—had me seeing double. I was nuts about her, and didn't want to reflect on her: unless my nasty suspicions that I couldn't help feeling were proved. I didn't believe what I thought myself. I was figuring on marrying her! Ho, ho, ho!"

Slow Freight South



By

Elwood F. Pierce

In which a Hobo *disastrously and humorously* Meets a Widow

WE MET at the top of a cliff. Below was a narrow strip of beach and a camp-fire with a dozen men gathered about it. One was picking at a banjo, others were at cards, and the rest lounging about the blaze, smoking and talking. Hank and I scampered down and joined them, proceeding without ceremony to make ourselves comfortable.

"I'm not much on superstition," he was saying, while I poked the fire, "but I do admit that I'm scared of one little number, ever since the time I'm telling you about. I suppose it's most because the old Bible at home tells me I was born on Friday, the thirteenth. Got a match? Thanks."

At any rate Hank was human. Every once in a while you meet them like that on the road.

"How'd you get here?" he asked, but did not wait for a reply. "By accident, I suppose," and his smile displayed rows of fine white teeth. "Travel's brought you—I've been in this Santa Barbara dump before, and I'm back with malice aforethought, so to speak." Hank drew nearer the fire. "Dandy little jungle," with a sweep of eyes and hands.

"Read back in Chicago where Santa Barbara was providing a hobo hotel. Wonder how such rumors get started? Guys just get fresh in the newspapers, I suppose— This fire feels good," with another shiver.

"This time of year a fire has its good qualities, even in California," I observed.

"Yes," Hank replied, not seeming to hear, "but I was telling you about that other occasion."

"YES, bo, I had the best time of my life during the war when I was making munitions and coining money at the rate of around a hundred and twenty a week. The old sock felt the strain. It wasn't hard work, either, and once I held down three shifts—in a shipyard—under three different names, and for six weeks, or until I got caught, I reached five hundred for seven days, which sort of put me in the class of bloated plutocrats. I bought clothes and went to the theater, just like I'd been born to that sort of life. It was all congested with sereneness while it lasted, but I made a fatal mistake."

"We all do," I reminded, "the best of us."

"Yes, sir, I made a mistake—the worst

kind of a mistake—and I should have known better, all things considered. I went and mixed in with a woman and tried to play a game I didn't know nothing about. I even went so far as to make love to her, and bo, let me tell you, things happened.

"For the first time in my jolly career I had a bank account and was sitting pretty—you wouldn't believe. By the time I'd been at war work ten months I had two thousand smackers tucked away. I hadn't any idea what I'd do with so much money, except a sneaking thought that maybe home, sweet home would get me yet, and I'd respond to the standing invitation to go back and fix things up with those of the folks that are left.

"I went and pulled an 18-carat boner because I wasn't satisfied with hanging out with the gang in a joint near the plant, but had to go and get me a boarding house. Oh, yes, I had to have a boarding house, just like I'm telling you, not one of those regular kind like a sensible man would pick, but a fancy establishment, kept by a lady who always was talking about the tower and the conservatory they had in the place where she once lived.

" 'Oh, dear me,' " she'd say with a sigh, 'when I was younger than I am now, how different everything was. I do wish you could have seen our ballroom. Twice a year mother gave a ball, in the spring and in the fall (she rhymed it, sort of), and we had the gayest times. And the decorations, and the flowers, if you just could have seen. But why talk about it? Those days are gone.'

"I stood it as long as I could and then I says to myself: 'Hank,' I says, 'who does this dame think she is, anyhow, and what does she take you for?' All the time she thinks she is getting the stuff across regular. Took me for a boarder because she is afraid to stay alone in the house at night and needs company, not because she has to, and all that. So I says to myself, here's where I make this half-century plant think I'm the Prince of Wales. I think up a spiel concerning my sister, the Princess Somebody, and her approaching wedding to the Duke de Something Else, only I'm able to restrain myself in time.

"So I let her have the big secret, which is to the effect that actually I'm not what I seem. I'm working on munitions because I think it my patriotic duty when, as a matter of fact, I own a big hog ranch out in Iowa, with hundreds of men working for me, and a winter home in Florida, with a flock of orange and pineapple groves around it, and another place in California which I seldom go to no more, preferring Florida; and a ranch in Texas that a man couldn't walk across in a month."

" 'Well,' I says, 'you do, don't you. You got the whole world, ain't you?'

"She says, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful if they'd find oil.' So I proceeds to drop a few hints strong enough to sell gilt-edged stock in the Atlantic Ocean. 'You're a wonderful man to serve the dear old flag this way,' she tells me, 'and it's too bad there ain't a few more like you.'

" 'I'm too old to fight,' I responds, 'but thank heaven I can serve in the front line trenches here at home.' All this time she was looking at me in a pious sort of way and then whispering, 'My, you must be awful rich.'

" 'That's something I don't never talk about,' I say just as low, and like as though I want to forget how much land and money I really do have.

"ANY one would think a woman with good sense would see right through me, but she ain't that kind. 'Don't tell nobody,' I instructs her, 'because my affairs ain't nobody's business. Only you've been so good to me and acted so kind, that I don't mind you knowing.'

"The next day when I'm coming home from work I hear her talking about me to the woman next door and explaining that I'm just a diamond in the rough and such good company to have about the house.

"Bo, from that moment I was a lost man. I didn't have a chance, as I might have known that night as we sit under the piano lamp and she says in a way she must think is coy, 'But one of these days, dear Mr. Hankins, some woman will be stealing away that great big heart of yours. 'Tain't right for a man like you to be single; 'tain't Christian, Mr. Hankins; 'tain't like one would expect of a man like you.'

"She keeps getting coyer and coyer and has her best dress on and her hair all waved nice, like as though she was going to a wedding or a funeral. 'You must have some one to share your tears and joys, dear Mr. Hankins; 'tain't natural no other way.'

"Right away I know I've made what

them writers call a foxes paw, and that I am going to rue that story about the Texas ranch and the Florida winter home and all the rest of it. Imagine a guy that ain't known no kind of a home for twenty years or more but a box car or these here jungles, and who thinks he's normal, putting out a yarn like that. The bo who says in the book that all men are fools ain't so much a fool himself. He has me sized up for a fadeaway, especially in the matter of this widow woman I'm telling you about."

Hank paused as though overcome by the nature of man. "I don't know much about widows," I said.

"She was a widow lady all right, and when I first went there to live always was telling about her first husband and what a wonderful man he was, and how when he died the house with the tower and the conservatory went blooey and wasn't no more, because the family creditors sort of liked the looks of them. She'd been in this war boom town two years, and none of the people don't know nothing about her past or where she come from, and besides everybody is so busy with their own affairs, which consists of rolling in war cash, that they don't pay much attention to her stories about her home with the tower.

"Them was great days, bo, but they're done and won't come back no more—I'll take a pipe load of that—thanks!

"SO AT night we sit in the parlor, like I'm telling you, and after a while she starts in to reading me stuff out of a book about beautiful brown eyes and shimmering pools and My-heart-goes-out-to-thee-sweet-one and all the rest of the gush. And by and by she quits using the electric lights, saying she prefers the gas, and keeps turning it lower and lower until I feel like a spirit at a seance, and as though I was hog-tied. She's made up her mind to show no mercy and I know it.

"Thinks I, well I might as well die for a fish as a sucker, so here goes, whereupon I take her hand and make queer noises with my mouth and all manner of contortions with my eyes. That goes on for several nights, when all of a sudden she makes the big splash and throws herself over sideways and into my arms. 'Oh, you wonderful man,' she says, just like that, and commences rubbing her hand over my face and looking like an ailing heifer.

"What I should have done was run and get as far away from that widow and that widow's town, shipyards and munition plants and all, as I possibly could, but no, that ain't me. Having started out to be a fool I play the game like a farmer at a fair when he tries to pick out the shell that covers the little white pea.

"If I remember correctly I calls her sweetheart and a few other witty names. 'Do you mean that?' she asks, her eyes shining, and right away I makes the horrible confession.

"After that I think things over for a spell and decide that it's time to get away from there and get away quick. At first I consider climbing out a window and sliding down the porch after I've thrown down my baggage, because I have accumulated, like I say, a couple of suits of clothes and an extra pair or so of socks, and then beating it for a place where the timber is congested. But, oh shucks, I says to myself on this night I'd intended to go, what's the use; another day won't make no difference and I can hang on as though I like it.

"So it went, and by the next night that woman had my name written in the Widows' Book of Fate. She has me sorted and cataloged and indexed. Sentence has been passed and there ain't no such thing as appeal. When once your name goes on her docket she acts as judge, jury and hangman. She plays the game like as though she has sixteen or seventeen aces in the hole, and a deck of kings and queens to spare."

"That's a woman, all right, Hank," I remarks—remembering.

"'COME on,' she says—and come on I do.

"We waltz down the street while she does a lot of talking. She talks about everything from violets that bloom in the spring to how easy it is to keep a servant girl if you treat them right. Then we bang into a jewelry store and she says 'Come on' and I come, like a kid crawling down-stairs for its first Christmas tree.

"'My fiancé will take the ring I picked out this afternoon,' she says, careless like, and immediately this innocent little bank account of mine gets heart disease to the extent of six hundred and sixty plunks that might have been put to better use.

"Of course I hesitates, never having been the kind of man to fire money out of a peashooter. Actually, it's been few times in my life when I've had the money to shoot. 'Ain't you speeding things up a little?' I asks, pretending to inspect the diamond. 'Why should I be paying out all this jack for a ring?— That's what I want to know?'

"Her eyes get hard, like I'm telling you, and she gives me a glance that would make a cake of ice think the weather is cold. Talk about the stare of some of them dames at the back door when you asks them for a handout and they starts in to telling you how as you ought to be ashamed of yourself and it might do society a turn if you went to work for a change—they ain't in it with this widow woman when it comes to dishing a look with a razor edge. 'Come on,' she insists, 'don't quibble; give him a check, and come on to the movies.'

"After that I don't leave as I plan, because if I crawl through the window I'll have to go without the ring, and I ain't figuring on nothing so foolish as that. Catch me blowing and leaving all that money tied up. 'Tain't natural, as the widow would say."

"AIN'T it funny," I observed as Hank stops, moodily like, "the fool things some men will do?" For a moment Hank looks hurt.

"It's on Tuesday night, as I remember, that I buys Little Sunshine the ring. All the rest of the week I watches for a chance to get the sparkler back, diamonds always being negotiable, but that gem is as safe with the widow as though it was at the bottom of the Pacific. Simply can't get near it. And ain't I sore? She means well, thinks I, so I hate to use violence. I want to get out of the mess, but I want it to be on the square—on the square in this case including theft and arson but stepping clear of assassination. Luck sure starts to fade away from me the moment I tells the tale about the hog ranch in Iowa and the oil lands in Texas.

"By Saturday I'm beginning to get sick and tired of sitting under the parlor lamp at nights. I'm weary of the widow and the widow woman's town and everything else. The trouble is that while I'm busy getting mixed up with the skirt, Spring arrives and I've heard a bluebird sing. It's when the bluebirds start to sing that I get the old itch in the feet and know it's time to be on the move. That's how I feel that afternoon.

"There's a railroad runs through the center of this here town and just as I come to it a freight train ambles through sort of lazy like, with a couple of shacks perched on top where the breeze can hit them and a couple of bos peeping from behind the door of an empty. You know most of the bos left the road during the war and it is sort of good to get a glimpse of this pair.

"The drag slows down, then stops and blocks traffic on Market Street. First thing I know I'm walking down the track to where this empty is that I'm telling you about, and who should one of them bos be but Jack Topper who's done more than one jaunt with me across country and who knows the habits of more town marshals than any other bo adrift."

"Pretty lucky, Hank," I tell him. "Pretty lucky."

" 'Come on Jack,' I says, 'this is the town you been looking for. Better come and visit with us for a spell.' So he piles off and we have a palaver about things in general and our two selves in particular. He says how as maybe he can think of some way to get back the ring. And we both agree we had ought to pair up again and beat it for some place else. I can trust Jack, for he ain't one of them kind that lets his head get turned by money. It don't make no difference to him whether I got three dollars or three thousand. Jack's the other honest man in the world, and a good pal.

" 'I guess I'm the only guy in the U. S. A. that ain't working and ain't aiming to,' says Jack. 'They don't catch me turning in for that stuff. What good's money, anyhow? And if you get it you can't spend it more'n a dollar a time. A dollar at once is enough for anybody.'

"Anyhow, I give Jack a boost along financial lines and agree to see him in the evening. When I gets home Little Sunshine is waiting with the remark that she has a surprise for me, said surprise consisting of a trip on the morrow into the country where she has friends and we can spend a day in the spring sunshine.

"Thinks I, dear lady, just you let me get you alone on a country road and there ain't going to be nothing to what I'm going to do about that ring. We're going to have a driving rig, of course. I'll entice her a couple of hundred miles from no place, take the ring, throw her over into a field or a ditch, double back for the extra suit and socks and be off with Jack before she's picked herself out of the weeds. That's what I plan. Only trouble is I ain't much of a plotter, and besides, widows are one of life's great mysteries."

"All women are a mystery, Hank," I said—remembering. He contemplated the fire, knocked the ashes from his pipe and shook his head in sign of agreement.

"WELL, I didn't get to see Jack, because Little Sunshine wouldn't let me out of her sight. 'I'm going out,' I says, 'because there's a little business I want to transact.'

" 'Going out,' she answers, 'how can you, when you could sit at home here with me and talk? Just think of all the years we've missed when we might have been together like this. You don't know what love is!' And she commences to sniffle and put her arms around me. I sure am taken in; but then, thinks I, what difference can it make, because this is going to be the last night and by tomorrow I'll be on my way. I've stopped at the bank and have my money sewed in the lining of my coat. I'm ready.

"The next day there's a rig hitched in front of the house, like I'm telling you, and by nine we're off. Great weather, too, with the right kind of a spring sun. We ain't gone far before I begin to notice something. 'Where's the ring?' I ask, trying not to seem anxious.

" 'Don't you worry about the ring,' she replies, and gives the reins a jerk that makes the old skate pick up her heels and jog along like she knows where there is some nice oats. 'I'm taking care of that ring, and it's safe.'

"Ordinarily I might have enjoyed that ride, because I always like getting behind a horse, even if the horse ain't no Man o' War. But I'm worried about the ring and kicking myself fore and aft for having been such a fool as to put down the cash for it. It begins to look as though the day is wasted, so far as getting back the real estate is concerned, and connecting with the ring is the only important thing in life just then.

"At last, after about an hour and a half, we turn into a lane and drive up between a lot of trees to a big house, with a barn on the side, and a couple of hogs rooting in the sod. 'This is where the Fairlambs live,' says Little Sunshine, as she yells to a man who comes sneaking out of the barn, 'Hello, Mose, here we are!'

"From that on things commence to get lively. I can't quite make out what it all means, but I can see there's something in the wind. In the first place there is the smell of chicken frying and a half dozen ladies are fussing about something amazing. Little Sunshine kisses them all around with a gang of 'Ohs' and 'Dear mes' and 'Bless your hearts.' Then the widow thinks of me and gives the high and noble to the crowd, first saying, 'This is the gentleman upon whom I have conferred my heart and hand,' or some such speech that don't mean nothing to me, and then they parleys that they congratulate me, and how lucky I am and what a fine woman I'm getting.

"Nobody don't seem surprised at the glad tidings and once, when the dames is all busy making noises with their mouths, Mose catches my eye and winks. Says I, there's a bird who's thinking what a plumb fool I am, and I don't blame him.

"The women keep up a gabble such as no one ever heard before, all talking at once and falling over each other to set the table and turn the chicken in the pan and monkey with the rest of the food.

" 'How are you feeling?' asks Mose with another wink. 'Like as though you could kill a couple?'

" 'Why stop at a couple,' I replies, thinking he means the women.

" 'Come on with me,' he says.

"We go to the cellar—a great big cellar with everything in it from a threshing machine to a copy of 'A Child's Garland of Verse.' The most interesting article, however, is a barrel of hard cider—hard cider, bo, hard as a ton of nails. That is when I find out what he means by killing a couple. Everything is fine, only we start in to make the sky the limit. 'Don't be afraid,' says Mose, getting affectionate and hugging the barrel as though he is in love with it. 'This is the best cider in Carroll County, and she certainly has been a jolly little playmate all winter. Guess maybe you don't like this stuff, eh, what?'

"I suppose we'd have kept up that two-handed party if a voice hadn't called 'Mose,' and Mose says 'Yes, we're coming right away love,' and we move back to where the women have just noticed we were gone. . . . Did you ever get lit up on cider, bo? It ain't the fanciest stuff in the world, but it sure can be active when it wants.

"By this time the party has an addition in the person of a gent in a frock coat and a collar that runs all the way round. He is busy Sister Janeing and Sister Fannying them and sniffing the chicken, while the whole crew hovers around him and calls him 'Dear Mr. Spencer.'

"I bow and say 'Pleased to meet you,' while Mose is familiar and wants to know how is business. Another drink or two of that cider stuff and like as not Mose would have played with the old bird's whiskers.

" 'What time—what hour is the—ah—ceremony?' inquired the Rev.

" 'Six o'clock,' somebody says, 'and then we'll eat.' Then I begin to realize how the day has been getting on.

"Ceremony, thinks I, ceremony; this is interesting; looks as though I've stumbled on something. All the time the cider is working its way to my head, and Dear Mr. Spencer is taking on a blur and then expanding and turning into two of him while I'm getting so I don't like his smile.

" 'And the dear blushing bride,' says he, playful like, as he turns to Little Sunshine, '—the dear blushing bride.'

"All at once I experience what you might term the great awakening. Crooked work in the air, by gosh!

"Little Sunshine does blush, just like I'm telling you, and turns to me and says, 'Come out here, I want to talk to you.' "

"That's the way with them, Hank," I remarked, "you can't keep them quiet." And maybe I don't know.

"WHEN we get out into the big hall that divides the living quarters from the parlor, I don't give her time to say anything. Am I scornful? And am I nasty? I think I have good reason to be vicious, considering the mess I'm in, to say nothing of the cider.

" 'What's all this talk they're making?' I ask. 'This blushing bride stuff—'

"The widow gets coy right away and tries to make her eyes look liquid and limpid. 'You mustn't carry on this way, dearest,' she whispers, 'because this is just a little surprise.'

" 'Surprise,' I fires back, 'this ain't no surprise; it's the triumphant entry into Constantinople. It's the fall of empires and a dozen earthquakes rolled into one. And it's a fool idea that I ain't ready to stand for. When I get ready to marry I'll let you know.'

"Didn't that make her mad, though? Didn't she hop around? Bo, Little Sunshine, in the one minute period allotted her, reads my title clear and never thinks about coming up for air. Her words are the kind to make a guy look at himself and agree the devil is a Sunday-school boy.

" 'Humiliate me in the presence of my friends, will you?' she blazes. 'You will, will you?'

" ' 'Tain't my fault,' I answers. 'I didn't invite you here.'

"Then she rages again something fearful. 'Don't fool yourself,' Little Sunshine tells me, 'I'm prepared. I'm ready; go ahead. Sometimes soft-brained men have to be persuaded. And here's the persuader—the nicest little persuader you ever saw in your miserable life. Look at it—this is for such idiots as you.'

"Out of her blouse she extracts one of them little shooting guns like dames use when they make up their minds a man had ought to die and their press agents think it's about time their names was getting on the first page so they can weep a little in court and then go in the movies. She's pointing the persuader right at me.

" 'What do you say?' she asks coldly, 'What do you say? Do I win or lose?'

" 'Oh, I guess I'm waving the white flag,' I answers, thinking all the time that is the best game to play, because I have a gun of my own that I know how to use. But she has me tied. If there's one thing I'm afraid of, it's a woman with a gat, because they never miss when they aim a little old pistol at a man.

" 'Have your own way,' I surrenders, seeing two guns instead of one by this time, on account of the cider, 'but you might have talked the thing over with me, seeing as how I'm the party of the second part, so to speak. And we got to have a license, ain't we? Or don't you go in for licenses?'

" 'I've got the license, so you needn't worry about a thing', Little Sunshine answers.

" 'Let's have a look-see' I demands, humble like. 'Let's see the way you got it wrote down. I'm particular about having my age right, especially on marriage licenses. It's a habit I have.' One thing certain, if I get my hand on that license it's farewell widow— Say, are you listening?"

I POKED the fire by way of retort and handed a cigaret to one of the card players.

"She flashes the license from some place and holds it up. 'Gosh,' I murmurs, reading, 'it ain't me you're aiming to marry. Who's this guy Abraham Grant McKinley?'

" 'That's your name,' the widow explains, 'only, poor man, you've forgotten it.'

" 'That's funny,' I retorts, 'because I never did before.'

"Then, bo, she brings out a clipping from a newspaper with a big headline which says, 'Millionaire Texas Oil Man Disappears; Believed Aphasia Victim.' This same aphasia, as I find out later, being the thing men use as an excuse when they want to get away from the trouble of having relatives.

" 'That's you,' the widow says, 'and here's your picture.' There I am, or some one who looks so much like me our own mothers wouldn't know the difference.

"Of course Little Sunshine thinks I'm the missing Texas bird, on account of me having told her about that ranch, and has me figured out as Little Old Loss of Memory himself. Yes, sir, she's got me on the docket as this Texas oil gink what is walking around the country without being able to tell who he is.

" ' 'Tain't me,' I tries to explain. 'I ain't near as good looking as that.'

" 'Yes, 'tis you,' the widow comments, looking at the picture critical like. ' 'Tain't no worse looking than you, nor no better looking, neither. It's you.'

" 'All right,' I remarks, with my eye on that little gun of hers, 'guess maybe that is me, and if it is I got a wife already. Wife named Alice—and a lot of kids. It was on account of the youngsters making so much noise that I walked off and left.'

"All she did was smile—like a spider over a feast of flies. 'Nixie,' she replies, making a face at me. 'This picture in the paper says you're a bachelor. And anyhow I wrote to the postmaster.'

"Then it's my turn to laugh and I say, 'That don't mean nothing. I know that postmaster. Used to work for me on the ranch. He's the biggest liar in Texas, which is giving a guy an awful rep.'

" 'Then your sister must be a still bigger liar,' for the widow won't be downed, 'because I wrote to her, too, and she says you are single and describes you something perfect.'

" 'All right,' I says, 'have your own way, only you are in for one grand little disappointment. I feel sorry for you getting fooled this way. Don't say I didn't warn you. But if it's to be a wedding, let's make it a real one—the kind of a wedding I'm used to down in Texas; a rip-roaring, snorting affair with plenty of excitement. Let's all be so merry we won't never forget it.'

" 'That's the man,' volunteers Little Sunshine, clapping her hands. 'Now you are the noble person I always thought you were.'

"The widow is all upset with joy and gets careless. In the midst of her carelessness I get hold of the gun. 'This is our leading wedding guest,' says I, pointing it at her. 'The real live article when it comes to getting joined in matrimony.'

" 'Put that thing down,' Little Sunshine blazes, with that hard look back in her eyes, 'it's loaded.'

" 'Imagine that,' I answers, 'it's loaded; how thoughtless of you.' "

Hank hesitated to give me the benefit of the situation. He had an eye for dramatic qualities.

"SO I runs back to where Dear Mr. Spencer and the rest of the flock of kidnapers are assembled, Little Sunshine right at my heels, and tells them to let the music start as we're going to have a dance like they do in Texas. I ain't never been to no wedding in Texas, but I imagine how a Texas marriage should be pulled off and I'm itching to act accordingly. 'No music?' says I, 'well that's too bad! Still I can furnish some, so let's start!'

"With that I fires into the floor and yells, 'Come on, everybody, dance—this is my wedding and we're going to dance.' Then I fires again.

"They don't know what to make of it, the preacher especially, who is white and scared.

" 'Come on, Reverend, shake 'em dogs. Sister Jane, pep up; a little exercise ain't going to hurt you. Be sociable.'

"And so I fires again and again, at necessary intervals, until I've finished Little Sunshine's persuader. Then I takes my own gat out and lets them have that.

" 'Ain't nobody can criticise that cider of mine,' says Mose, out of breath from jumping. 'It certainly is the dancing brand.'

"In less than five minutes that room is a wreck, like I'm telling you. The table is turned over and there is fried chicken all over the floor. Also the wedding cake has curled up and died. It might have been worse, only I run out of bullets. I keep on pulling the trigger, but the old gat is exhausted.

" 'All right folks,' I laughs, backing out, 'hope you all enjoyed yourselves. Pleased to have met you all, especially you and your cider, Mose. Some day when I'm entertaining I'll have you around at my house.'

"Do I get out of that place? Do I? You're jolly well right. I hit a clip that would make Man o' War look like a scrub —out of the front door and across the lawn and over into a field. But I've been smoking too much to get far without losing my wind. I suddenly develop a flat tire and go blooey. So I halt to take on a little air and look around to see what is going on back of me. What do you suppose? Oh, nothing, only Little Sunshine a few yards away with one of them Revolutionary War Period muzzle loaders in her hands.

" 'Stop,' she yells, 'stop!'

"Bo, was you ever up against one of them Revolutionary Period weapons like they got in museums? You've missed something. They ain't as foolish as they look, and I know.

"Her telling me to stop didn't make no difference, nor add nothing to the gaiety of nations. So I starts to run again, like as though I had to make California before breakfast. All at once there is a boom and I feel a smarting sensation in and around the legs like a million bees has started stinging me. Little Sunshine has potshotted, as it were, and I've captured a handful of lead, all cut up in little pieces. Sometimes I think I'll never get through picking out shot, the biggest trouble being that it's hard to get at. After all it was better than having my face to the enemy. At that moment it starts in to rain buckshot, and I'm doing my best to get away from where I am."

I'm all sympathy, but Hank don't let on. "I'd have got, and got good," I suggested.

"After I'm done jumping around and find out for certain that I ain't shot to death, I peep around to see what the widow is doing. I'm interested. There she is, sprawled on the ground, legs in the air at an angle of forty degrees, where the kick from the Revolutionary relic has sent her. It's a comical sight. Thinks I, shall I go back and see if she needs help, because after all I'm human and this is a woman whose hand I've held on certain foolish occasions. But I decides it won't do to take chances.

"Also I ain't feeling none too nifty myself. 'Tain't pleasant to have some one plaster you from the rear with an assortment of lead chunks. To say the least Little Sunshine's performance ain't been ladylike."

"SHE must have thought a lot of you." Hank had checked his flow of language. "It was funny, wasn't it? Pretty hard to imagine."

"All this takes place in a field with a few trees growing here and there, and I turn my back to observe the lay of the land and while I'm doing that there's another bang and more pieces of lead scatter themselves around me.

"There's only one thing I can think to do and that's hide. The strain is turning me into a white-whiskered goat, because it wouldn't surprise me to see the inmates of that house for the insane back there come trooping out with their own Revolutionary Periods and make me the target for a lot of little pot shots. I'm in a bad way, like I'm telling you.

"Little Sunshine, after her second explosion, comes toward me limping. It strikes me all of a sudden that the lady must be Scotch the way she persists in the matter at hand, for she ain't like nobody I ever met.

"I couldn't explain in a million years what made me pick out a tree or what induced me to try to break my neck making for it. But I did. Maybe it was instinct, or luck. And did I climb that tree? Did I? I ask you. You should have seen. It was one of them foolish periods in a man's life when he don't think about such a little thing as consequences.

"The widow comes up rubbing her shoulder where the old Revolutionary plaything had done her a dirty trick, and puffing. That gun had a jolly kick.

" 'Are you coming down?' she asks.

" 'No, I ain't coming down,' I mocks, like that, 'and why should I, when the chicken's spilled over the floor? Fine way to treat a carpet.'

" 'You might as well come down first as last,' she retorts, 'because you ain't going to get away from here until you do come down.'

" 'That's fair enough,' I answers. 'Much obliged for the information.' But I didn't feel as sarcastic as I speaks.

" 'It's your memory,' she says mournful. 'It's your memory that's the cause of this.'

" 'Don't you worry about my memory,' I puts in, holding on to one or two branches with one hand and rubbing myself with the other. 'There won't be nothing wrong with my memory as long as I'm kept busy picking out buckshot, which is liable to be the rest of my life. Say, dear lady, the next time you undertake to start a war, I wish you'd pick some other army than me to practice on. 'Tain't friendly.'

"She laughs and tries to get coy. 'Come on down,' she pleads, 'and let's forgive and forget.'

" 'Nix,' responds I, 'them sentiments is dead.'

" 'All right, old cousin,' Little Sunshine splutters, 'you'll be sorry; because I ain't going to leave here till you do come down. You don't suppose I'm getting up a wedding for nothing—not at my age—do you?'

" 'Wish you luck, playmate,' I tells her, 'but I'm one of them till-hell-freezes-over blokes and can stand as much punishment as you can.'

"Just then old Mose looms up, after the shooting's all over, and stands by Little Sunshine and looks up at me. 'How's she coming, partner?' he asks with a wink. 'You sure are a running fool when it comes to getting away from a gun and a drinking hyena when the cider's flowing from the spigot. How do you like it up there?'

"I'm getting real peeved by this time, because the business of sitting on a limb after you've been sprayed with buckshot ain't no joke. 'You go to hell, you and your cider.'

" 'Come on down and let's have another dance,' jokes Mose, winking again. 'Brother Spencer surprised me. And him the sort as preaches against dancing as a sin. I blush for him. Come down and let's drown sorrow in a mug of—you know. 'Tain't often I have lively visitors like you out here on the farm.'

" 'I'll write and tell your sister on you,' weeps Little Sunshine.

" 'Tell the postmaster, too, while you're at it,' I growls. 'Tell the whole universe you got me treed. Tell them how you're standing over me with a gun and that I'm already shot full of little holes. Tell them anything.'

"The widow, you know, has old Revolutionary Period in her hands, and as it is a triple muzzler, I figure that there's no less than a ton of shot concealed in that last barrel and I ain't taking no chances."

"Do they make them with three barrels?" I ask, because I'd never heard of it. Hank closes his eyes as though in pain and insists that they do.

"THERE'S a lot of things I'd like to have happen just then, only they don't. And right at that point Mose Fairlamb takes up the rôle of the little suggester. Guess he likes to see the widow having fun with me.

" 'The supper's spoiled,' Mose observes, 'but I don't see why that should interfere with the wedding—or why he should insist on sitting on the limb of a tree, either.'

"Little Sunshine commences to cry again. 'Just think' she bawls; 'just think of all this having to happen to me.'

" 'We got the preacher, ain't we?' asks Mose. 'We got the license, ain't we? And sure enough we got the man, even if he does think as how he'd like to break away from the party.' Mose takes the widow by the arm. 'Marry him as he is, straight on the hoof and no questions asked, catch as catch can,' he advises.

"It all dawns on the widow and she dries her tears while I cuss some more. Then she suggests that they'll get the Reverend out and go through with it just as though nothing has happened. She looks up at me, saying she'll marry me right on the limb.

" 'If you do,' I says, 'you'll have to sit on the limb, too, and that's when you take on to yourself one of them old-fashioned falls, with me doing the pushing. Come on, do; it'll be funny,' and I laughs hollow like, pretending that I don't care, which wasn't the way I felt.

" 'Humph,' the widow sniffs, 'stay on your old limb. Me remaining on the ground won't make no difference, just so long as the proper words is spoke.'

"Mose offers to get the Reverend and

trots off, leaving Little Sunshine there with old Revolutionary Period. She asks me to come down and go in the house and be married like as though we were Christians. It's getting dark by this time.

"I tell her to watch me and then make movies of it.

"Pretty soon Mose and Dear Mr. Spencer and all the Sister Janes and Sister Fannies come trooping out and everybody is laughing and saying how romantic. I starts in again to cuss something fearful, thinking maybe my words will frighten them away. But they only laugh the harder, except the Reverend.

"Mose tells them to come on and let's have action. He tells the Reverend to proceed and let us take our medicine.

"Dear Mr. Spencer remarks that it's most unusual. 'What say you, sister?'

"LITTLE Sunshine pipes up for him to go ahead, that it's all right so far as she is concerned.

"And right there in the dark that preacher puts on his glasses, clears his throat, pulls a little book from his pocket, and begins to read the marriage stuff.

" 'Wait a minute,' I interrupts, 'till I come down. Let's be Christian after all.'

"So I crawls out of the tree while they all laugh. 'Tain't easy to climb down, and little wonder, considering the amount of buckshot I'm crippled up with. I go over to where the widow is standing and suggest that everything is as snug as a bug in a rug. 'Let me have the ring.'

" 'Oh, my,' says Little Sunshine, 'I forgot the wedding ring. How could I have done that? It's in the bureau at home.'

" 'Gracious,' remarks I, 'how absolutely careless.'

"She sniffles about being careless. I intimates that if she has that little old engagement ring of ours handy it might do.

" 'Would that be proper?' she hesitates.

" 'It isn't the ring that counts,' says the Reverend, solemnly. 'It's how men and women live together in peace and happiness, loving their neighbors as themselves, that matters!'

"Sister Jane wants to know if we hadn't ought to go into the house."

" 'No,' I answers stubbornly, 'I was chased out here and here I stay. I wouldn't go in that house and get married for nobody.'

" 'You're right,' Mose puts in, 'perfectly right.'

"The widow passes over that ring I'm telling you about and the moment I get it in my hand my mind is made up. It's good-by widow.

"We catches hands like I guess brides and grooms is supposed to do and stand there with Dear Mr. Spencer in front of us. Then he starts again.

"He has just reached the 'Do you?' stage when I forget all about buckshot wounds, Revolutionary Periods and everything. I don't delay to make no statements, but I let go Little Sunshine's hand and am off. And I run and run and run, and then run some more, and get lost in the darkness. For a couple of minutes I can hear Little Sunshine yelling for me to 'come back here!' But do I go back? Not with that ring in my hand and all that money sewed in my clothes.

"I can't say how far I go, but finally I bumps up against a freight train. It's farewell to the suit of clothes and the extra socks, thinks I. It is the same railroad that runs through this here war boom town I been stopping in, and the old drag is a heavy one and moving slow. It stops dead for two or three minutes, then gives the old highball. It's bound south. Right quick I'm' up on a bumper because I don't have no time to go prowling around looking for empties and like as not there ain't none.

"Pretty soon somebody is crawling over the back of the car to where I'm standing. This somebody peers at me an instant and then says, 'Hank, where you been?'

" 'Tain't nobody else but Jack Topper."

"Imagine that, Hank," I volunteer, there being nothing else to say.

" 'Don't touch me,' I says, as he starts to reach over to make sure I'm real, 'because I'm not feeling good on account of being full of buckshot holes.'

"Then I tells him.

" 'Serves you right,' Jack remarks, 'though you're luckier than you deserve, having the ring and everything. What was the big idea in thinking about getting married on the thirteenth?' Topper's the kind of a guy that knows everything, being observing. 'The thirteenth of the month is a shooting day, as you had ought to know!' "

Ghost Trailed

A very Short Story of a Crime and its Punishment

By Neil T. McMillan

"SLANT, I want you."

Slant glanced up quickly. The sheriff was standing in the doorway of the Elite Pool Hall, hands on his hips nowhere near his gun. Slant slipped his own hand to the butt of his weapon and drawled,

"The Hell you do."

The sheriff's hands moved along his belt to the buckle. He tugged and belt, holster and gun dropped to the floor. From a rear pocket he drew forth a pair of handcuffs and took a step forward. Slant drew his six-gun, rested his elbow on the card table before him and pulled back the hammer.

A moment before his muscles had been loose. Now they were tense and his hand steady. The drink devils whispered in his ear and he grinned evilly. He brought the sights of his gun down the left shoulder of the slowly advancing sheriff, down the striped shirt and lined them up on the bright star covering the officer's heart. The sheriff advanced. The gun roared.

Slant kicked his chair backward, sprang to his feet and tipped the table and its load of cards, chips and glasses into the laps of his excited fellow players. He leaped across the prostrate sheriff and ran to the door, his four partners, guns out, at his heels. Outside, they swung into their saddles, emptied their pistols at the lighted door and rode off into the dark.

At a gallop they rushed down the main street of the town, past the straggling houses and into the peace and quiet of the desert. After four miles they stopped beneath the cottonwoods of a feeble creek and gathered together.

Bam, short for Alabama, a nickname his native state had earned him, pushed his horse to the side of Slant's.

"Slant, I reckon we better kinda cache Spud here 'til he sobers up a bit. He's nigh onto ten sheets in the wind an' I been aholdin' him in his saddle for the last two miles."

"All right, take him off his horse and let him lay where he falls," Slant grunted.

Bam and Slim dragged the half unconscious Spud from his saddle and let him drop with a thud.

"Done," Bam reported to Slant. "Now what you reckon we better do? Where'd we better hit fer?"

"I been athinkin' of Ol' Man Martin's

place up in the Mad River Mountains. What you think?"

Bam thought for the space of a minute before replying.

"Reckon that's as good as any. Ol' Man Martin won't be tickled to death to see us, but he'll keep his mouth shet and thet counts fer a hull lot. There's sure nough some bad country 'twixt here an' there, though. But I reckon we'll make the foothills 'fore sunup and we'll hev a moon in less'n an hour. Heads up, hombres, let's vamoose."

LEAVING the drunken Spud in a heap on the bank of the creek, the four touched their heels to the sides of their horses and trotted into the sagebrush. No one spoke for an hour. The moon crept over the horizon, flooded the prairie with golden light and long shadows and then, as it climbed higher, changed its light to silver and shortened the shadows. The alkali dust, raised by their horses' feet, rose in a cloud to choke the riders. Slant spoke.

"How far we come?"

"Close onto ten mile," Bam replied.

"How far to water?"

" 'Bout a mile, I reckon."

Slant was quiet for another minute.

"Bam."

"Yeh."

"What you think of me shootin' thet hombre?"

"Right smart shootin' I calls it. I see a hole jump into his star and down he went. Right smart shootin'."

"Yeh, I know. But I oughten tuh hev done it."

"Well, I reckon yo' oughten tuh, nuther, but yo' caint he'p thet now. What you reckon he wanted yo' fer?"

"I dunno."

At the end of the mile, that Bam had predicted, the group came to a water hole. They filled their sombreros, drank with the thirst of sobering men, and watered their horses.

"Think we'll be followed?" Slant asked.

"Ain't nobody to foller us thet I knows on," Bam replied.

"There's somebody acomin', now," Slim reported. "Hear 'im?"

The four dropped to their bellies around the rim of the water hole and reached for their guns. To their ears there came the unmistakable sound of a horse's hoofbeats, coming rapidly toward them. A low cloud of alkali dust, showing white in the moonlight, marked the changing position of the oncoming horseman.

"Wait 'til yuh see who he is," Slant commanded, "and then if he don't look good to us we'll let 'im hev it."

"It's Spud," Bam whispered. "I know thet roan hoss of his'n."

Spitting out a curse, Slant rose to his feet and as the breathless Spud reined in his horse in their midst, he jerked the sweating rider from his saddle.

"What in hell's the matter with yuh? Come ridin' in like a cyclone without whistlin' or nothin'. D'yuh wanta git plugged?"

"I seen him," Spud gasped. "I seen him."

"Seen who, yuh locoed coyote?"

"The sheriff, I seen him."

"You're still drunk. The sheriff's dead."

"I know it. I know it, but I seen him, hole in his star, blood on his shirt an' everything, jest like I seen him back there on the floor."

Spud turned his back on the others and pointed his finger at Slant.

"An' he's afollerin' you. He's afollerin' you."

Slant knocked the offending finger away and growled:

"Jest kinda hold your tongue still in yer head 'til yuh get back yer wind and cool off a little. You're either still drunk or crazy. Now then, if you c'n speak without runnin' yer words all together like a greaser, let's hear yuh."

Spud took a long breath and began.

"Well, I guess you fellers musta left me tuh sleep off a drunk, cause I woke up under a cottonwood tree and there he was astandin' there, the sheriff, jest like I told yuh, hole in his star, blood on his—"

"Yuh said thet before," Slant growled.

"Yeh, I know I did. There he was astandin' there all white in the moonlight and agrinnin' and he wasn't after me 'cause he coulda had me if he hada wanted. He's afollerin' you."

"What did yuh do? Run like a scared jack-rabbit I suppose. You did huh?"

"I shot at him," Spud asserted. "But yuh can't hit no ghost."

"Ghost, huh? Now I know you're loco."

"Ghost, I tell yuh. It was a ghost and I seen him. I shot at him an' then I got outa there and he laughed. Gawd!"

Spud shivered and seemed to draw himself smaller.

"Gawd! how he laughed. A-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha. Jest like thet."

Slant felt the hair bristle on his neck, shook himself and in a sudden rage struck the trembling Spud in the mouth and knocked him to the ground.

He glared at the rest of his followers. Bam turned to Slim and Red.

"Better git on yer hosses, gents. Time we was agittin' outa here."

Silently the three mounted. Slant swung to his saddle and started out in advance. They followed. Glancing over his shoulder Slant saw Spud rise slowly from the ground, climb to his horse's back and come on, keeping a discreet distance behind the others.

After a mile of such riding, Slant turned in his saddle and called:

"Bam."

"Yeh."

"Come here."

Bam obeyed.

"What d'yuh think?" Slant asked. "Think he really seen a ghost?"

"Well," Bam was slow to answer, "I dunno. I ain't never met up with a ghost myself but I've heerd tell of them thet has, mostly niggers, though. Hit's this way, Slant. Most folks when they gits too almighty lit sees snakes and pink elefunts, but I reckon Spud sorta runs to ghosts. Yep, I reckon, thet's it. He done lapped up too much of thet liquid dynamite and he done seed himself a ghost. Yep, thet's it. Leastwise I wouldn't worry none."

"I ain't aworryin'," Slant replied. "I'm jest awonderin'. Folks back where I come from used to say thet ghosts was caused by people adyin' 'fore they was able to git somethin' they was awantin' in particular."

"Uh, huh, well, in thet case, I reckon there might be a tolerable good reason to suspect there's a ghost atrailin' yo'. Thet sheriff sure 'nough wanted yo'."

THE five riders urged their mounts up the swell in the desert floor that marked the first rise to the mountains now standing out boldly on the horizon. At its top they stopped to give the horses a rest and a chance to regain their breath. Slant made a studied effort not to look back. Bam, out of regard for his leader, did not look either until Spud exclaimed in a low, hoarse voice.

"There he is, there he is! See it? See thet dust cloud back there?"

Bam looked.

"Slant there sure 'nough is somethin' follerin' back there. I jest cain't tell where it is but hits somewhere near thet dry wash. There sure 'nough is a dust cloud."

"Ghosts don't make no dust clouds," Slant yelled. "Come on, let's git 'im."

Downhill they raced, reaching for their guns as they rode. Long before they reached the spot where Bam thought the dust cloud had been there was nothing. Nor could they find anything. Slant, in feverish haste, began riding back and forth, back and forth, bent low in his saddle, looking for tracks.

"Slant," Bam said at his elbow, "take a look at Spud."

Spud, distant a hundred yards, was riding away. Slant yelled.

"Where you goin'?"

"I'm agittin' outa here. Thet ghost's afollerin' you, not me," Spud yelled back. "I'm not ridin' with nobody a ghost's atrailin'."

Slant swung his six gun and fired. Spud laid low in his saddle and kicked madly at the sides of his horse. Crack! Slant fired again without effect. Spud gained the edge of the dry wash and before disappearing in it turned to shout:

"Jest you wait 'til he laughs."

He was gone. Slant opened his gun, extracted the two discharged shells and pushed two fresh ones home. He snapped his pistol shut and asked:

"Which one'll we follow, Bam, thet coyote Spud or—or—"

Seemingly from everywhere, and yet from nowhere, there came over the prairie, with an eery note in it—

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Gawd!" whispered Bam. "Reckon it got Spud?"

"It ain't afollerin' Spud," Slim replied. "It's afollerin' Slant."

"The hell it is!" Slant exploded. "If it's afollerin' me, why don't it come git me? I'm here."

" 'Cause we're with you," explained Red. "Thet's why."

"Then I'm agoin' to git it. Thet laugh's human, it ain't no ghost, and I'm agoin' to git whoever's alaughin'."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Bam cautioned. "Where yo' goin' to look? Yo' don't know where thet laugh comes from."

"No, but—"

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

The four unconsciously raised their guns. Something akin to fear crept over the skin of Slant. There was sweat on his brow.

"Best thing yo' kin do," Bam whispered, "is hit fer the hills. Vamoose, hombres."

NOT unwillingly, Slant allowed himself to be escorted up the hill. On its top, as before, they stopped to give their horses breath. Slant would not look back but Bam searched the landscape lying back of them in the moonlight. He turned to Red.

"See anything?"

Red shook his head. Bam looked quickly about him.

"Where's Slim?"

Red was hesitant but after Bam had repeated his question admitted:

"Slim ducked into the wash back there. He said he was athinkin' the same as Spud. He wasn't goin' to ride with no hombre thet a ghost was atrailin'."

Bam nodded his head in understanding. Slant felt red anger surge over him.

"The yellow coyotes," he muttered. "The dirty yellow coyotes. Maybe you two gents'll be thinkin' the same way, huh?"

"I ain't sure I heard no laugh," Red replied, "but when I'm sure I ain't agoin' to be here neither. Look! Look, over there! No, not back of us, over there at the side. See it? See, the dust cloud?"

"Wait a minute, Slant," Bam cautioned again as Slant jerked his horse about. "It won't do yo' no good to go flyin' atter it. Like as not it'll be gone when yo' git there. Better let it ketch up with us, then we'll git it whatever it is."

"Yuh ain't thinkin' it's a ghost too, are yuh?" Slant asked.

"I ain't sayin'," Bam replied, evasively.

Onward they traveled, all three together now, as if for protection, with the shadows of the moon shortened to almost nothing. At every rise they searched the country around them and always, sometimes behind, sometimes at the side, sometimes ahead was the white dust cloud. Finally, Slant could stand the strain no longer and charged, his two comrades at his flanks.

As before, there was nothing where the dust cloud had been. As before, Slant rode back and forth, back and forth searching for tracks. And as before there came across the stillness of the night the eery—

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

And Red was gone. Bam saw him go and said nothing. Slant saw him go and although he held his gun in his hand he sent no shots cracking after him.

There was a strange fear in the eyes that Slant raised to Bam.

"Yuh wanta go too?"

Bam shook his head.

"No, I'll stick with yo' but you gotta do like I say."

"All right, what do yuh say?"

"Keep on aridin'. Don't waste no more time shootin' off after nothin'."

"All right, all right, let's go."

RIDING abreast the two men rode on, climbing steadily until the foothills of the mountains were reached. The moon was casting long shadows now and was close to the edge of the hills. It would soon be dawn. Both men watched for it with anxious eyes, for the sun would surely reveal to them whether the dust cloud was of ghost or human origin. Neither spoke, neither looked behind them nor to the side. They did not need to, for they felt that the thing was following them.

At last the foothills and Bam spoke.

"Right up this cañon, Slant, there's a little ol' spring where we might stop and cook a little coffee."

Slant looked up with haggard eyes.

"Fine."

It was dark in the cañon, dark and quiet and—

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

With a whimper, Slant drew his pistol and rapped its barrel in futile nervousness on the pommel of his saddle. Bam laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!" came the laugh again echoing among the rocks. Slant's whole body grew tense and cold. He cocked his gun.

"'Member what I told yo'," Bam reminded him. "'Member, don't yo' go flyin' off no mo'e or I'll leave yo'. We gotta keep agoin'. We cain't waste no time cookin' coffee. We gotta keep goin' 'til daylight."

"All right, all right, only if I could only see the damn thing, if I could only shoot at it. This waitin's terrible, Bam."

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

With a cry of anguish, Slant drove his spurs into his horse and leaped away from Bam. He dashed down the side of the cañon and into its bottom. His horse stumbled and fell. He went on foot, searching frantically behind each bush, each tree, each rock. And the gray light of dawn came into the east and the white mists of the mountains floated in the cañon. Still Slant went on, on until he came to the grass surrounded spring. There it was!

Slowly and carefully he brought his gun to bear upon a half visible something that was standing beside a rock on the other side. He fired, once, twice, three times and on up to six. Then he looked. It was still there. He buried his face in his hands and when he looked again—

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

The sheriff, hole in his star, blood on his shirt, and his hands sliding along his gun belt to the buckle. He tugged and belt, holster and gun dropped to the ground. From a rear pocket he drew forth a pair of handcuffs and advanced slowly toward Slant. Moaning in terror, Slant put out his hands and the cuffs snapped about his wrists.

He felt them, they were cold and real. He looked up. The sheriff threw back his head and laughed,

"Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Slant dropped to his knees and putting out his hands felt the sheriff's boots. He felt his legs, his hips and then rising suddenly, exclaimed,

"Hell, you ain't dead."

"No," the sheriff laughed. "I ain't dead."

"Spud said you were and thet your ghost was atrailin' me."

"Yeh, I know. I was down, about ten feet from him, in thet dry wash 'way back there when he turned and yelled back at you. And thet give me an idea and I been workin' it ever since. I been alaughin' and ahidin' from you all night. It sure was funny to see the way your pardners left you."

"Musta been," Slant said dryly. "But how come Spud didn't kill you when he shot at you?"

"Did he say he shot at me? Ah-h-h-h, ha, ha, ha, ha! He didn't stop tuh shoot. He just ran, Lord, how he ran, and I like tuh split my sides alaughin'."

"Well, how come I didn't kill yuh?"

"When?"

"Jest now."

"You might've done it if I hada been inside my poncho. You sure filled it full of holes, scared as you was."

Slant followed the sheriff's gaze and saw the poncho, clearly visible now in the pink light of dawn, hanging on a bush, beside the rock.

"I was asquattin' behind thet rock 'til you got through shootin'," the sheriff explained.

Slant looked at him in wonderment.

"An' I didn't kill yuh, back there in the pool hall?"

The sheriff shook his head and unpinned the star from his shirt. He turned its back to Spud.

"You sure made a mistake in shootin' at my star. See, how the bullet got stopped 'fore it got all the way through? Looks like there was a hole in the star but the bullet's stuck on the back side. 'Bout all it did was to puncture me enough to make me bleed and to knock me down. You never waited to see if I was dead."

Slant looked at the handcuffs on his wrists and swore,

"Aw, hell."

"The Three Men Over the Hill" is the title of a complete novelette by H. Bedford-Jones to be published in next month's, the January, Everybody's. Its scene is Sumatra; and one of its chief characters is a sultan who has rather a pretty little idea of entrapping a young Englishwoman. The novelette fits exactly into Everybody's new plan of giving you well-written fiction that is filled with action, excitement and genuine, atmospheric quality.

The

A Complete Novelette of Fabulous Treasure & Desperate Men

VASILIEV reached the half-way house about nine o'clock at night but already the place was in darkness and he had to pound on the door before Hurst came shuffling from his bunk to let him in. It was a March night and very cold. Hurst held a flickering lamp on high and his shirt tail flapped about his skinny legs as he stood shivering in the gusts of snow that blew through the doorway.

"Come in quick, afore I freeze," he mumbled, his teeth chattering. "I didn't expect anybody this hour o' night. Been in bed long ago." Vasiliev came in, banging the door behind him. He stamped the snow off his moccasins as Hurst put the lamp on a table and vigorously shook a youth who was sleeping on a pallet in a corner. "Louie! Louie! Dern yer hide, Louie, wake up! Git out there and take care of Mr. Vasiliev's dogs."

Louie, an angular Indian lad, bestirred himself, sleepily struggled into his trousers and moccasins, wrestled briefly with a mackinaw and lurched outside, still yawning. The cabin was illuminated by a ruddy glow for a moment as Hurst opened the stove and dropped a stick of birch on the fire.

"How about coffee and something to eat?" said Vasiliev. "I've come a long way."

"Coffee ready in no time," grunted Hurst, sitting down on the bunk and putting on his pants. "Can't give you much else that's hot. Bit of cold moose-meat in the cupboard and some preserves and pie. If I'd knowed you was comin' I'd of sat up. But there ain't been many on the trail lately. You're the second that's been here all week. T'other fellow came in late this afternoon." He jerked a stubby thumb in the direction of a shadowy bunk on the far side of the room. "Sleepin' now," he said.

Vasiliev, shaking the snow out of his short, fur coat looked up indifferently.

A foot in a gray sock stuck grotesquely out from the rumpled blankets. That was all that could be seen of the man who slept. His head was buried beneath the covers and the outlines of the bunk were lost in the gloom. A muffled snore struggled out of this obscurity.

"Who's he?"

"Keith."

"Who's Keith?"

Hurst, who had put on a pair of shoepacks and was slithering over toward the

HILL *of* GOLD

By Leslie McFarlane

stove with the laces dragging on the floor, turned around in surprise, his mouth agape. He was a short, shrunken fellow with a button of a nose and a spiritless, tobacco-stained mustache. His bald head gleamed in the lamplight. His watery eyes blinked. He stared at Vasiliev.

"Keith," he repeated. "*The* Keith!"

"Never heard of him."

"Never heard of Keith? Unlucky Keith?"

"I haven't been in this country very long," grumbled Vasiliev, flinging the coat aside and coming over to the stove to warm his hands. "Anyway, I've been in the bush all winter."

"And y'ain't never heard of Keith?" Hurst wagged his head in profound astonishment and began to fill up the coffee-pot. "Well I'll be derned!" he marveled. "I didn't think there was anybody hadn't heard of *him*." He looked appealingly at Vasiliev. "Think, man. Keith! Ain't you never heard the name. Hard Luck Keith. You *must* have heard of him."

"No," said Vasiliev, impatiently. "What does he do?"

"Prospector," answered Hurst. He reached for the butcher knife, wherewith to slice the moose-meat and he paused by the table. "That old fellow," he went on, lowering his voice almost reverently, and pointing the butcher knife toward the bunk in the shadows, "is the best prospector in the world. The very best—bar none."

Vasiliev's thick, red lips curled in a sardonic smile beneath his black mustache and his strong teeth gleamed. "You're taking in a lot of territory," he said.

"I know it," whispered Hurst. "And I still say it."

Vasiliev looked curiously at the foot in the gray sock that projected from the bunk into the area of lamplight.

"He must be worth lots of money."

Hurst sawed at the moose-meat. There was a silence for a while.

"He ain't worth a nickel," he said mournfully, at last, and slapped a slice of meat viciously upon a plate.

LOUIE, the Indian lad, came back with Vasiliev's packsack and after assuring the traveler that the dogs had been fed and bedded for the night, returned to his pallet. When the coffee was ready, Vasiliev sat up to the table and attacked the moose-meat and bread while Hurst, lighting a pipe, perched on the edge of his bunk.

"If he's the best prospector that ever lived why isn't he worth money?" asked Vasiliev quietly.

Hurst shrugged.

"That's why they call him Hard Luck Keith. Why that old fellow," he went on, glancing up at the bunk across the room, "has found mebbe more gold and silver, and got less for it, than any man in Canada I guess. First man into Cobalt, first man into Sudbury, first into the Porcupine. Any one of them camps has made fortunes for hundreds of people. He found 'em all. And what has he got? Nothin'. There's some fellows just naturally born to be poor. He's one of 'em. And a regular—what d'you call it?—genius! A regular genius at findin' mineral."

"Geologist?"

"Geologist, nothin'! That old lad has sent geologists crazy. He finds mineral where geologists say it just ain't. He don't go by rules. He don't go by nothin'. He just *knows*. Can't explain it himself. He's a doggoned old wizard, that's what he is."

Vasiliev listened with a faint smile. He was vaguely incredulous.

"What did he ever find?"

"He's been in the North Country all his life, Old Keith has, and he's more'n sixty years old now. Knows every lake and river of Northern Ontario from Nipissing to Hudson Bay and over to Manitoby. Been prospectin' for years. He was in Cobalt before any one. He knew there was silver there so he went to Sudbury and took out a license and started back. What happened? He went on a spree. There he was, with the richest silver camp in the country waitin' for him to come and find it, and he got lost back of Temagami with a gallon of alcohol and by the time he come to himself again he found somebody had followed him up and went on into Cobalt and the boom was on. He could 'a' made millions. He never made a cent."

"Tough!"

"That ain't the half of it. He was first man into Porcupine. Staked the richest mine there and needed money quick and sold it for two thousand dollars. Two thousand. It's made millions. He was first man into Kirkland Lake and he got jewed out of his holdings there. He was the man that *found* nickel at Sudbury and his papers was made out wrong and he lost out there. Been first man in every camp and never made a cent."

"Unbusinesslike?"

Hurst glanced up at the bunk where the unlucky man lay sleeping. There was a dim light of affection in his bleary eyes. Vasiliev munched at the stringy moosemeat.

"Well, yes and no," replied Hurst. "If it was only that, he'd have made money in spite of it. He's made thousands and thousands of dollars for other people and hardly a cent for himself."

VASILIEV looked up sharply. He was a man marvelously gifted in seeing opportunity for himself in the weakness of others. No one ever knew his exact occupation. He defied classification. He was a fur trader—a prospector—a financier—a timber dealer—varying with the moment. A hard man. A shrewd man. Above all, an unscrupulous man. For the first time, now, he became interested in Hurst's garrulity.

"What's the reason, then?" he asked.

"Unlucky," answered Hurst, gloomily. "Just plain unlucky. He knows how to find mineral but he can't hang on to it. He's been skun out of good claims so often you'd think he'd be wise to all the tricks there is—but somethin' always seems to happen. And then, of course, he used to go after the booze pretty hard. But *that's* nothin' against him," added Hurst, magnanimously. "Any fellow that's been as unlucky as him and had all the disappointments he's had oughta get some comfort out of life even if it's only in bein' stewed most of the time."

This philosophy left Vasiliev unimpressed. He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. "If he's found so many good mines he can't be so very unlucky," he remarked. "A good prospector *has* to be lucky."

"It ain't luck with him. Not the findin' of it. He just knows, see? That's his expression. 'I know rock.' That's what he says. And he does know rock. He can make all them geologists and prospectors that learned their prospectin' in school look like two cents. Old Keith, he'll say, 'I got an idee there may be silver up in such and such a country!' Or copper. Or iron. And every geologist will give him the big laugh and they'll say there just *can't* be silver up there. And accordin' to their books they'll be right. They'll say it's just downright impossible and that the Lord simply wouldn't let any min'ral be up there and that if there was any they might as well throw all the geology books away. But I'll be danged if that old lad won't wake up some mornin' after a drunk, get a grub-stake and start out with some beans and some flour, and in a week he'll be back with samples that'll have every prospector in the country breakin' his neck to get up there and stake claims where the geologists said there just couldn't be no metal nohow."

"And why won't Keith make any money out of it."

"He'll find out he signed away a three-quarter interest for his grub-stake, or somethin' foolish like that, or mebbe he'll need money so bad he'll sell out right away for about a thousand dollars. He'll live high for a couple of months and then he'll end up as bad as he was before. He oughta have a guardian, he ought."

Vasiliev's dark eyes gleamed. Hurst took a deep breath and tapped his pipe against the stove.

The faint snore rose regularly from the gloomy heap of blankets in the bunk. Although he was oblivious to them, hidden from them, the personality of the unlucky man who slept in the shadows dominated them both.

"Perhaps he might get along better with a partner," suggested Vasiliev, softly.

Hurst shook his head. "He's always traveled alone. Played a lone hand from the start. He's a good bushman—no better in the North—so it's no trick for him to go out into the woods by himself. *He* knows where to find the gold. No partner could help him *that* way—"

"But to protect him. A good business man, for instance."

"He's dealt with good business men before. They all stung him. They all know he's like a kid when it comes to money. Easy come, easy go. He's come nearer bein' a millionaire than any man that ever lived, I guess, and somethin' always happened. Of course, he's made money, here and there. But never anythin' real big. Once he made ten thousand—out of a mine that's worth millions today. What did he do but charter a special train and take the boys down to Montreal. A special train. I can see him now. All his friends with him, and Old Keith settin' in the back of the train smokin' a big cigar, and a bottle of whisky beside each foot, settin' out for Montreal in his special train. Said he always wanted to know how it felt to travel around like a dook or somethin'. He was back in two weeks of course, busted, but he said he didn't care. He'd had a good time. So did all the boys. That's what he's like—"

A mutter from the shadows interrupted the reminiscent flow.

"Guess I was talkin' too loud," whispered Hurst, apologetically. "Nearly woke him up."

"Time we were in bed anyway," said Vasiliev, quietly, as be began to undress.

But after he was in his bunk, after the lamp had been blown out and the sturdy snores of Hurst had been added to the nocturnal gaspings of the Indian lad and the wheezy slumbers of Hard Luck Keith, he did not go immediately to sleep. Instead, he lay on his back, gazing wakefully into the darkness, wondering how a man of wits could turn to his own use another's destiny of misfortune.

CHAPTER II

A VICTIM OF THE STORM

THE man known as Hard Luck Keith left the half-way early next morning and with him went Vasiliev. Both were bound for End-of-Steel.

When Vasiliev met the genius of rock at breakfast he was disappointed. Keith was not imposing. He was short in stature, slight of build, and in manner mild and unassuming. His gray hair was still thick despite his years and his white mustache emphasized the mahogany tan of his wrinkled face. He had wintry blue eyes that were very candid. A rather child-like old man who nodded shyly to Vasiliev when they were introduced, who ate his breakfast in silence and who said little until they were well out upon the trail. Then it was to wave a mittened hand toward the southern hills that rose dimly from the great reaches of white snow and blue-black forest, and mutter two words—

"Storm comin'."

He bent over his sled again as though ashamed of this verbosity. Vasiliev, following like a dark giant in black sealskin hat and short black fur coat that added to height and breadth above the average, smiled in amusement. The man might be a wizard as a prospector but he was no weather prophet.

"Sure?" he called out. The sky was innocent of cloud. The sun glared. The ragged horizon was abrupt, like clipped tin against glass.

The old man nodded his head vigorously but did not turn around. He was an odd little figure in a worn, gray parka, driving a sleazy pack of mongrels of hungry and villainous appearance. He was like a nimble old gnome of the snows. Vasiliev, in sleek furs, with a well-loaded sled drawn by picked huskies, felt immeasurably superior. He was younger and had money in his pockets. The old man was poor, unlucky, at the end of his tether. Storm coming! He laughed to himself. He, Vasiliev, had clear eyes and knew better than to predict storm on such a day. The old codger was probably showing off. Hadn't Hurst said he had a reputation as a bushman?

"Well," said Vasiliev, "I hope you're wrong."

"I'm afraid not," grunted Keith.

The dogs sped on. Vasiliev wanted to ask questions. He had been more impressed by Hurst's tributes to the unlucky man than he cared to admit, and there were schemes in the back of his head. But it is difficult to strike up an intimacy with a man whose back is turned to you and Keith was one who seemed to contrive to wrap himself in a cloak of reserve. Not until they stopped by the trail for lunch, when the sun was in midsky, did the old man speak again.

THEY smoked after eating in the shelter of a clump of balsam.

"You've been prospecting, haven't you?" asked Vasiliev.

"Blanket-staking."

"I don't know much about the game. Just what, now, is blanket-staking?"

Keith puffed and frowned slightly. The questions of tenderfeet always annoyed him.

"Staking when there's snow on the ground. Don't know what you're gettin'."

"Taking a gamble, eh?"

"It's always a gamble. Winter or summer. Makes no difference."

"But a *good* prospector, now—you must admit it's less of a gamble with him than with a poor one."

"Ain't any such thing as a good prospector. Gold is where you find it. There ain't no rules. There's just luck. Some prospectors are lucky. Some ain't."

"And you—"

"Unlucky!"

He said the word slowly, with a hopeless intonation and looked away back down over the winding trail as he spoke, as though contemplating the disappointments of dead years.

"Your turn will come."

"Never."

It was spoken with such simple finality that for a while Vasiliev was at a loss for words.

"Oh, come now," he said at last, with the air of a physician soothing a patient. "You don't mean that. You really don't mean it, do you? Bad luck can't last always.

"Mine does."

"But that's pessimism," declared Vasiliev. It was as if he regarded pessimism as the unforgivable sin. "Why, Mr. Keith, from what I've heard, you've made some very valuable finds in your time. Surely that wasn't bad luck."

"Good luck for other people."

"But perhaps you took up with the wrong kind of people. Your partners—"

"I never go partners. Play a lone hand."

"Perhaps that's been the very reason!" exclaimed Vasiliev, triumphantly, leaning forward. "Now, listen, Mr. Keith. I don't believe in this bad luck business. I don't believe in it at all. If you've found gold in your time you're lucky. If you've lost it you've been unbusinesslike, or you've been cheated. If you had a partner, now, a business man—"

"I've always gone on my own."

"But why not change? Look! I have some money. Not much, but some. I have faith in you. What do you say if we arrange a little trip in the spring. I'll stand the expense," said Vasiliev as the old man shook his head, wearily. "All you supply is your prospecting ability and your knowledge of the country. If we don't find anything we haven't lost anything. If we do, you will find me very reasonable. Very reasonable indeed. I'll see that your interests are protected. Surely all the gold hasn't been found—" His eyes gleamed.

"Some gold left, I guess," replied Keith, with the first animation he had yet shown. "But I never go partners."

His utterance was so conclusive, there was such complete finality in his tone that

Vasiliev, who had been buoyed up by hope, lost his poise for the moment and became immensely agitated.

"But think, man!" he urged. "Think of the money. The money!" He lingered lovingly over the word. "You risk nothing. I take all the chances. If we lose, I accept the loss. If we win—and from what I've heard of you, Mr. Keith, I'll warrant we could find *something* good—you will find me a very fair man to deal with."

"No."

Vasiliev felt very helpless in face of this definite rejection. Arguments, subterfuges, he could have met but there was something so utterly final in the old man's attitude that he was baffled.

He began to feel angry. The old fool! Turning down an opportunity like this! So persuasive had he been that he almost convinced himself that a high honesty motivated him and he felt aggrieved that his magnanimity had been so rewarded. His pride was hurt. He tried another tack.

"You are not a rich man, Mr Keith."

"I'm not poor. Matter of fact, I'm retirin' after this trip."

"Retiring?"

"My son, he's gone and formed a company. Mine machinery company. All my friends put their money into it. I got a lot of friends," he said, with a certain pride. "Lot of friends made money out of properties I've found. Some came to me often and said, 'Here—take a thousand,' like that. Different than it is in the story books. But they did. And I wouldn't take it. Charity. I lost. It was my fault. I wouldn't take their money then. But this company's different. They 'pointed me president and I get a sal'ry, see. Nothin' much to do, but they figger my name's worth somepin'. My son, he runs the business. So I ain't worryin' about money now. Got enough to retire on. Figger it's time to quit."

"But you told me you had just been blanket-staking."

"My last trip. Thought I'd like to go out in the bush once more before I was through. I'm never goin' prospectin' again."

"But why? A man like you—"

"A man like me," replied Keith, biting at his mustache, "ain't got no business makin' the same mistakes over and over again." He paused, wearily. "I know rock. That's all. I know rock." The words fell with heavy emphasis. "I don't know business. I don't know men. And then, I ain't got no luck. I've lost out so many times that them facts is beginnin' to dawn on me by now. Y'can't beat that combination. But the main point is, I'm not lucky, and I've figgered out I mebbe wasn't never meant to make any money out of this country, so I've quit. That's all."

In reply to this, Vasiliev could only shake his head, sadly muttering that surely Mr. Keith must be mistaken. He murmured platitudes to the effect that it is a long lane that has no turning and that the darkest hour is just before the dawn.

They were as raindrops on cement before the old man's implacable resolution. Keith got up and went over to his dogs.

Beaten, Vasiliev followed.

THE sun had gone behind a ragged bank of cloud and the distant line of the horizon was no longer clear but obscure and merging with a greasy shadow that lay heavily above the hills.

A faint breeze sighed. A little eddy of snow rose before them and subsided lazily across the trail.

"We'll be caught in it," remarked Keith. He urged on his dogs.

Vasiliev was flushed with wrath. It grated on his temper further to realize that he had mentally scoffed at the old man's predictions of storm.

"Just a little blow," he grumbled.

"Hope so," replied Keith non-committally.

They went on. Vasiliev looked back to the north. He was startled by the somber and forbidding aspect of that gloomy sky; clouds frowned; a gray veil had been drawn across the blue line of forest.

The veil shifted uneasily to and fro and pursued them with a silent insistence. It poured down from the black sky. It crept across the miles of snow and changed in hue from gray to white and in depth from a veil to a wall.

The trail wound through a little poplar bush and for a time the oncoming snow was hidden, but the dry branches of the poplars creaked sadly and rustled uneasily. When they came out on the other side of the bush onto an open plain all the trees were whispering and swaying. Vasiliev looked back again and the wind whipped his face sharply. It flung a handful of dry, stinging snowflakes against his coat.

"There's an Injun's cabin farther on," called back Keith. "Off the trail a bit but I guess we can make it."

The wind began to pound at them in short and sudden gusts and it hurled snow about them, snow that came, not drifting down from above but whistling almost parallel with the ground. It collected in little heaps in the folds of the packs on the sleds. The dogs whined.

The wind became a gale and the gale became a hurricane.

Snow swept at them in blasting sheets. Snow drove at them in stinging clouds. Snow roared about their ears. Snow blotted out the world.

The storm that had crept upon them so silently and so delicately was a howling, maniacal inferno. They staggered before its bitter fury. It raged at them mercilessly. Vasiliev could only see Keith as an obscure shape struggling through a gray void, like a dark and formless ghost in a white and formless dream.

The wind shrieked, whistled, moaned. The snow scourged them, hurled itself endlessly at them, blinded them. White demons hooted at them.

The cold was bitter. The storm sapped them of warmth. The sweat of their bodies changed to ice and their garments hung stiffly about them like chill husks. They staggered knee-deep in clinging snow and bowed under the pounding sweep of a hurricane.

Vasiliev gritted his teeth and tried to quell a fear that persisted in rising like a cold flame.

His dogs floundered. He beat at them with the long whip. They got up and plunged on in the wake of the dim figure ahead.

His feet rose and fell mechanically. His mind was numb. The hypnotic pounding of the monotonous gale and the remorseless grip of the cold made an automaton of him.

The old man seemed tireless as he struggled forward into the face of the fury. Sometimes he was entirely hidden from Vasiliev's view by the screen of storm. He did not stop, he did not turn, he did not slacken pace; sometimes the veil would be lifted for a second, revealing him with startling clarity, trudging on through the heaping snow, and then it would descend again, making a shadow of him, perhaps blotting him out altogether.

They came to a place where a clump of trees bowed almost level to the snow and there the old man turned sharply to the left. Vasiliev knew the trail went straight ahead so he called out hoarsely—

"Where are you going?"

The old man did not seem to hear so Vasiliev shouted again and again, hurrying after him through snowdrifts deeper than any they had yet passed through, down a stormswept slope. He gasped with the effort, he cursed the old man for losing the trail, yet knew that he must follow, for it would be suicidal to separate in this blizzard. At last he saw Keith turn, vaguely wave one arm in a rigid gesture and call out something that was drowned by the roar of wind and swish of driving snow, then go on his way.

Down the slope they struggled, the dogs whimpering and plunging in the heavy drifts. Vasiliev was aghast. Had the old man lost his way? He was half minded to turn back and seek the main trail again and leave this ancient fool to his own fate, but then it struck him that perhaps Keith was heading toward the Indian's shack of which he had spoken. Reluctantly, he admitted to himself that perhaps Keith was not as foolish as he seemed.

The confused dark mass ahead of him was no longer in motion and he drove up to find the old man's sleigh abandoned, the dogs huddled in the snow. Over to one side he distinguished the obscure form of Keith bending over something.

Wondering, he left his own dogs and stumbled through the drifts.

He found the old man struggling with the figure of a man, almost buried in the snow. Only the head and shoulders were visible. The fellow had been overtaken by the storm and had wandered off the trail to fall before the blinding, overwhelming force of the blizzard; snow had swept over his body, piling in little heaps in the ridges of his clothing and about his supine limbs.

"What the hell! Who is he?" exclaimed Vasiliev.

"It's the Injun!" shouted Keith to him as he bent to help lift the man.

In their rough grasp, as they dragged him from the snow, the man stirred and muttered faintly. Vasiliev was faintly shocked as he glanced at the lean, brown face for although the fellow was still alive it was plain that death had breathed upon him.

CHAPTER III

THE SECRET OF THE HILL

HOW they finally brought the Indian back to his weatherbeaten shack a mile farther down the trail through that raging storm Vasiliev never knew. He was conscious of the journey only as an aching nightmare; more than once his knees sagged under him and he stumbled into the snow, only to drag himself up and stumble forward again. His face was numb, his whole body was devoid of feeling. He felt as though he had been beaten by the whips of the gale until he had become insensate.

They reached the shack at last, a poor little place by the banks of a stream, with snow heaped high almost to the roof, and they lifted the man from Keith's sleigh and brought him into the hut. No sooner had they placed him on his bunk in a corner of the ill-lighted den than Vasiliev tumbled in a heap on the floor and lay there panting, too weak to move.

The old man glanced at him curiously and went outside. Above the howling of the wind and the steady slap of snow against the one window Vasiliev could hear him putting the dogs in the shelter of the lean-to.

The man on the bunk stirred feebly and whispered. Vasiliev became conscious that the Indian was looking at him. He turned and met the blank stare of two inky eyes in which the last glimmer of life was slowly dissolving. Unmoving, he returned the gaze. They were still staring at one another in a ghastly silence when Keith returned, dumping one of the packs from his sled upon the floor.

"Dyin'," grunted Keith, as he began to open the pack.

Vasiliev said nothing. He was sick and exhausted.

The Indian had closed his eyes. His head was thrown back, the chin toward the dark roof of the hut. He was an old man. His face was scribbled with wrinkles, the inscrutable record of his years, and his body seemed very frail.

Keith took a bottle from his pack, a small bottle with a few ounces of alcohol in it, and placed it to the mouth of the dying man. The Indian choked, coughed and his brown, gnarled fingers clenched. He sighed. His lips opened and closed in a noiseless gasp.

"Sorry, John," said Keith. "All I've got."

Then he set to work stripping off the Indian's clothing to see if he were badly frozen. The feet were stiff as tombstones.

"Snow!" ordered Keith.

Vasiliev lurched to his feet and went to the door. He reeled in the entrance before the blast of the gale, but he scooped up a handful of snow and brought it back to Keith, who set to work rubbing the Indian's feet.

"Make a fire," he grumbled.

Dully, Vasiliev went over to the battered stove. There was birch wood and some chips. He tore off some of the bark and soon the fire was crackling. Then he sat down on an upturned box and watched Keith, who was trying to fan the flagging spark of life in the body of the man they had rescued, now lying wrapped in dirty blankets on the bunk.

The Indian spoke. The voice was harsh, surprisingly clear.

"No good, M'sieu Keith—me die."

He relaxed, as though the effort had been terrific, and his eyes closed in pain.

"Don't be crazy," grunted Keith, rubbing vigorously at the man's body. "You're not going to die."

The fire crackled. The timbers of the little hut creaked before the onslaught of the hurricane.

After a long while the Indian opened his eyes again. His gaze wavered about the gloomy shack and at last rested on Vasiliev. He stared thoughtfully.

"Send him—away," he demanded.

"Send him away?" repeated Keith, in astonishment. "What's the matter with him?"

The Indian gestured faintly toward the doorway that led to the other room of the two-room shack.

"In there," he muttered.

"But why?"

There was a long silence—

"You skookum white man, Keith. Me skookum Injun. Me die. Want talk wit' you."

"I see," replied Keith, slowly. He bit nervously at his white mustache. "Do you want to tell me about—?" Here he glanced at Vasiliev, then mumbled something in the Indian's own language.

The dying man nodded.

Keith turned to Vasiliev.

"Don't mind, do ye?" he asked. "He's goin' to cash in pretty soon and he wants to tell me somethin' before he goes."

"No, I don't mind," said Vasiliev, heavily. He got up and went into the next room, an evil-smelling cell that the redskin had used for storing his furs. There was a strange light in his eyes.

For, in the strange tongue, of which he knew but a smattering, he had caught the word that meant gold!

THERE was only a thin partition between the two rooms of the shack. Vasiliev tiptoed over and crouched down with his ear to the logs, or rather poles, of which the partition had been constructed. All his exhaustion was forgotten. His cunning mind was alert. Gold!

For a while he could hear nothing but a confused mumbling from the other side of the partition, a mumbling in which Keith's quiet voice was uppermost. The Indian's voice was hesitant, he appeared to have great difficulty in speaking, at times the mumbling died away in a wheezy cough.

"Me skookum Injun, Keith—me know you long time—"

"Sure, you're a skookum Injun, John—a good fellow—", then a few words of the dialect, which Vasiliev could not understand.

The Indian's voice, faintly—

"Me tell you once—w'at you call him?—"

"Secret."

"—my fadder tell me—his fadder big chief—tell him. Me, I tell nobody—now me die—you skookum white man—" a long pause and then, with great clarity, the words seemed to burst from the Indian—"now me tell you!"

"You tell me?" There was incredulity in Keith's tone. He broke into the dialect. In a labored voice, the Indian replied.

Vasiliev writhed. He could not understand a word. What little he had overheard had been vague enough but it had been sufficient for him to understand that the Indian was about to pass on to Keith some tribal secret. Some secret connected with gold! He was in utter agony as the mumbled words of dialect went on, desperately striving to catch from that unknown language some phrase, some word that he might recognize.

"No, me tell you," muttered the Indian at last, obstinately.

Vasiliev pressed closer to the partition.

Keith was speaking again. He caught phrases—"not unless you want to—always knew you had a secret—perhaps you won't die—"

Was the old fool actually trying to discourage the Indian from telling him? Vasiliev was shivering with anxiety.

"No, me die. Me tell you—'bout—'bout the hill—"

Keith's voice came in an urgent, excited whisper, loud enough for Vasiliev to hear.

"About the hill of gold?"

For a moment Vasiliev was too stunned to distinguish words from the mumbling that continued in the next room. His mouth was agape with amazement. His head swam. Three words pounded in his brain. Hill of gold! Hill of gold! So this was the secret! Then, in sudden fright, he realized that he was not listening, and he leaned so closely against the partition that the poles creaked.

But they were talking in the dialect now. What was more, the Indian's voice was not little more than a whisper. Sweat stood out on Vasiliev's forehead; there were tense lines about his half-open mouth.

"—to the north—" in Keith's voice at last. "To the north, you said?"

An indistinguishable mutter of words came in reply.

"Can't you talk louder, John? Try—"

Words—a sluggish stream of words—a jargon—

"Follow the creek," said the Indian, in a tone grown suddenly and surprisingly strong and clear, "to the white rock—then—then—"

The guttural voice faltered, failed, became a whisper.

"Then what?"

A dull muttering, phrases that were unintelligible to Vasiliev—"when the sun goes down—the hill—the hill of gold!"

After that came a silence. It was broken by a sigh, a hideous gasping sigh.

"Ah!"

The bunk creaked. Vasiliev could hear Keith talking.

"Can't ye hear me? Can't ye hear me any more, John? Are ye gone?"

There was no answer.

"Mr. Vasiliev!" called the old man, quietly.

Vasiliev got up and tiptoed softly to the far side of the room.

"Yes?"

"Ye can come out now. He's gone."

The old man nodded. The Indian lay

motionless on the bunk, one arm flung out, the limp hand touching the floor.

"He was sick afore he started out to the trail," said Keith. "Then he got caught in the storm. I knew he couldn't last."

Vasiliev said nothing. He gazed at the figure on the bunk, unable to speak, unable to understand anything more than the fact that the secret of a hill of gold had been dangled before his eyes and had been suddenly snatched away.

THEY stayed at the shack that day and toward evening the storm died down. Vasiliev was confused. He was silenced by the bewilderment that seized him. He sat moodily in the shack and could scarcely bring himself to even grunt acknowledgment of Keith's infrequent monosyllables.

He did not know whether or not the Indian had told Keith the secret of the hill before he died. Wretchedly, he tried to recollect that blurred mumble of words, tried to piece the phrases together to form a coherent whole, racked his brains to remember parts that had eluded him. There was no use. He had not heard enough.

But had Keith?

Covertly, he studied the old man but there was nothing to be learned from that inscrutable and kindly visage. There was no gleam of ill-concealed delight in his eyes, no look of baffled resentment. He was just as he had always been.

"He's not human," Vasiliev told himself. "If he knew that secret he'd look a lot more cheerful than he is now. And yet—if he didn't know it—after being so close—he'd be raging. And he's neither. Poker Face!"

He had the sensation of colliding with a stone wall while in full flight. As the sickening sense of the disaster bore down on him he became fidgety and nervous. Once he felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to get up and go over to the old man and shout at him—

"Now then, tell me! Do you know where this hill of gold is or do you not? I'm tired of pretending I didn't overhear. Did he die before he could tell you, or are you sitting snugly there with that secret in your head. A hill of gold! Tell me!"

But he didn't do it. The old man's reserve was like an impenetrable armor. Instead Vasiliev sat moodily throughout the day, now and then gazing for long moments at the rough blankets on the bunk that concealed the corpse. He turned phrases over in his mind, wondered how he could bring up the topic that he knew was uppermost both in his mind and in the mind of Keith, and he could see no way of doing it in the face of the old man's imperturbable calm.

The hidden corpse was symbolic of the barrier that had risen between them. He was helpless. He did not sleep that night, and when morning came he was haggard for in the darkness of the night there had been a persistent vision of a hill of gold. A yellow glittering mass that towered in solid majesty to the sky, dazzling in the sunlight, rising in magnificence from the base earth, indescribably precious, unutterably sublime—that was the vision that filled the hovel.

When morning came they made shift to bury the Indian, clearing away the snow and hacking at the frozen earth with a pick and an ax. It was laborious and they could only chop out a shallow grave. They wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in the inhospitable ground, covered him with icy soil and heaped stones on the grave to defend his body from the wolves.

The hill of gold seemed to recede farther and farther into the distance as Vasiliev returned to the shack, for with the burial of the Indian the last assurance of its existence vanished. The hill of gold now lived only as a fragment of recollected mumblings in his mind. Perhaps it lived as a definite reality for Keith, a hill of which the precise location was known and remembered, but for Vasiliev it was only a torturing illusion.

They set out for End-of-Steel within the hour and on all that journey not a word passed between them concerning the hill of gold!

CHAPTER IV

STROHM

IT WAS not long before Vasiliev regained his customary calm and began to scheme. Back in Haileybury he settled down to a policy of watching Hard Luck Keith.

"I won't say a word to him—not a word," he said to himself. "If he doesn't choose to be fair about it and tell me he must risk the consequences. The first time he starts on a trip I'll know where he's bound. Then we shall see."

He met Keith occasionally, in the hotels, on the streets. The old man was invariably polite, but he never in any way alluded to their journey out from Hurst's. At times Vasiliev thought he detected a glimmer of mocking amusement in the wintry eyes and he was uncomfortably convinced that Keith knew all his incertitude and was secretly amused by it. But he waited.

"Spring will come. Then he'll start out for the hill."

But spring came and Hard Luck Keith stayed in Haileybury. To all intents and purposes he had done just what he had told Vasiliev on the trail from Hurst's. The old man enjoyed a great personal popularity in the town, and as president of the newly formed mining machinery company he enjoyed the dignity of an office to which he went every morning, with a pardonable vanity in his bearing. He appeared to have settled down to spend his remaining years in the town, finished forever with the trail. His old companions lounged about his office and spat tobacco juice on the floor and told stories. Keith luxuriated.

ALL the old-timers in town appeared to have invested money in that company and seemed to take a special pride in the new eminence of Hard Luck Keith. Theirs was a benevolent interest and even the humblest stockholder, the most hard-bitten veteran of the wilderness, who had scraped to get the money to invest in Keith's company, could not fail to achieve a proprietary glow when the old man came trudging down the main street to his office in the morning. He came down the street, chest out, shoulders back, his face glowing from the attentions of Scotty, in the Main Street Tonsorial Parlor, bestowing nickels upon children, returning greetings right and left with an expansive and utterly genuine heartiness, quite the most popular man in town. All were glad that his days of hard luck and privation were over and that he had found this little niche in which to enjoy some measure of adulation before he died.

All but Vasiliev. He glowered. As the spring days passed and Keith gave no sign of setting out into the bush he grew more and more puzzled. He was watching the old man with a catlike patience, but Keith basked in the sunlight of popularity and local eminence and gave no hint of leaving.

"Thinks he'll fool me," he told himself. "He knows I'm watching him but he thinks if he sits pretty for a while I'll figure he didn't hear the secret after all. I'll watch him till domesday."

But the old man made no move to go. The new company was prospering and he seemed content. Vasiliev daily became more puzzled and more anxious. The hill of gold filled his thoughts by day and his dreams by night; he loafed about town, not daring to leave lest in his absence Keith should slip away.

Weeks went by.

Finally Vasiliev reached a point of desperation. It came one day as he was walking down the street and met Keith face to face. He stopped, abruptly, in front of the old man.

"Are you really—are you really—" he stammered, "through with the trail? Did you mean that?"

Later he did not know what prompted him to ask this question. It was as if he had been in the grip of some uncontrollable force.

For a moment Keith did not reply. Then his eyes narrowed in a smile.

"Ye've been worryin' haven't ye, Vasiliev?" he said, sympathetically. "Ye're afraid I'm not goin' to look for that hill of gold."

The shock made Vasiliev's head swim. He could never have imagined such a remark. The existence of the hill had never been mentioned between them. And here was Keith, after all this silence, after all these weeks, mentioning it as casually as though he were referring to the weather.

"Why—I—I—" he stammered, losing his usual poise, "I don't know what you're talking about—really—a hill—"

The old man slowly took a pipe from his pocket and began to grope for his tobacco pouch.

"I've been wonderin'," he said, "how long ye could hold out. It must be pretty aggravatin', knowin' what ye do know and yet not knowin' enough." He thoughtfully tamped down tobacco in the bowl. "About the hill, I mean. Ye was listenin' that day, of course, and I could see ye was real worried after that poor Injun died. And ye didn't dare say anythin' to me about it. So there was no call for me to do any talkin'."

"I couldn't help overhearing," said Vasiliev, sullenly.

"Mebbe not." The old man lit a match and as he drew on the pipe he flashed a shrewd glance at Vasiliev. "But ye heard about the hill, and I guess that made ye sit up and take notice."

"Who wouldn't?"

"And ye didn't hear all that I heard. I know that, ye see. If ye did ye would have been out of here long ago."

"Do you mean," asked Vasiliev, "that you know where the hill is?"

Deliberately, the old man nodded assent.

"They why—why in heaven's name—?"

"Why haven't I gone lookin' for it? Because, Vasiliev, as I told ye that day on the trail—I'm through. I'm never goin' prospectin' again."

"But you can't mean that. Why it's foolishness!" Vasiliev laughed, almost hysterically. "A hill of gold! You won't even go looking for it?"

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you? Why, man, you must be insane. A fortune! Millions—"

"Mebbe."

"But you're certain of it. The Indian told you."

"The Injun never saw the hill. He was never there. It was a family secret. His father told him, and the father got it from his father. Perhaps it's all a dream."

"Oh, yes," said Vasiliev, impatiently. "Perhaps. But what if it isn't? You don't mean to say you're afraid to take the chance!"

The old man puffed reflectively at the pipe for a few moments.

"Matter of fact," he replied at last. "I am skeered to tackle it."

Vasiliev was stupefied. "But why—?" he stammered. "Why should you—?"

"Don't ye ever figger," said Keith, "that I get a lot of fun out of knowin' about this hill of gold? Out of knowin' where there's a fortune waitin' for me if I choose to set out and get it? After all these years of hard luck. I can walk down street these days and say to myself, 'Keith—you're the richest man in the whole North Country. Ye know where there's a hill of gold. No matter how much tough luck ye've had before, no matter how many fortunes have passed ye by, ye can go out any day and find a hill of gold.' Don't ye think I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. I used to figger the North had licked me. Now I figger I've licked the North."

Vasiliev could hardly credit his hearing. Had the old man gone crazy? Such reasoning was entirely beyond him.

"I'd rather have the hill," he said.

"Of course ye would. We're two different men, Vasiliev. Ye can't understand me in this. Don't know that I blame ye. But supposin' I set out to find this hill. Supposin' the Injun was wrong. Supposin' there wa'n't no hill at all. I'd be licked. I couldn't go down street any more and tell myself I was the richest man in the North because I owned a hill of gold."

"But supposing you did find the hill. Consider that!"

"Vasiliev," said the old man slowly, "I've found fortunes before. I've lost 'em all. I've had hard luck. I didn't get my nickname for nothin'. Somethin' always happened. I always lost what I found. No matter how careful I was, I always lost. Is there any reason to figger my luck is goin' to change now? For one thing, if I set out to find that hill of gold—you're the first man I'd have to fight."

"But no?" cried Vasiliev, in excitement. "Is that what's stopping you? Can't we get together on this—?"

"No."

He spat out the word almost viciously.

"Why?"

"It's my secret. It's my hill. I've never gone partners. I'm not startin' now. And besides—I'm through with prospectin'. If we found that hill of gold, Vasiliev, ye'd find some way of gettin' it for yourself. If I was your best friend on earth ye'd think of nothin' but that hill. Gold does that to a man. I've seen it before."

Vasiliev, argued, besought, implored Keith to believe in his high honesty. He was seized with a reckless excitement. His eyes glistened. The old man scarcely seemed to hear him.

"D'ye believe in what they call destiny, Vasiliev?" he asked at last.

"I don't know," said Vasiliev, dully.

"I believe in it. I've got a destiny. A destiny of bad luck. It was never meant that I should make money out of prospectin'. Why shouldn't I leave my destiny alone? Look ye, Vasiliev. If I went out to find the hill of gold, one of two things would happen. I'd find out that the Injun was wrong and that there wa'n't no hill, or I'd find the hill and lose it again. As it is, I leave my destiny alone and I can go down street and figger myself the richest man in the North. I've beaten the North. I'm leavin' things as they are. It's a grand satisfaction for a man as old as me, for a man that's been beaten so often, to know that he holds the upper hand. A hill of gold!" He tapped his forehead with a finger. "In here!"

And with that old man Keith turned abruptly away from Vasiliev and trudged off down the street without a backward look.

THERE was only one explanation in Vasiliev's mind. The old man was crazy. A stark lunatic.

He went for a long walk down the Lake Shore Road and at last sat down on the beach below the trolley tracks and gazed moodily out over Temiskaming, shimmering in the spring sunlight. The Quebec hills lay green and purple across the great floor of water. An airplane came buzzing out of the sky like a bluebottle, winging homeward from the Rouyn camp. A trolley roared past him on the way to New Liskeard.

He cast pebbles into the water, reflecting bitterly on the strange conversation he had just finished. Mad! That was it. Crazy as a loon, the old fellow was. Unless there was something deeper. Unless Keith was trying to discourage him, trying to put him off the trail.

"He'll never get rid of me," he muttered. "If I have to starve, I'll stay in this town and watch him."

But he could not persuade himself that this was Keith's motive. Something convinced him that the old man was sincere in his wild idea of a destiny that would prohibit him from actual possession of the hill of gold. It was unfortunate that Keith was able to allow himself the luxury of owning the hill in imagination. If the man happened to be hard up for money, now. . . .

Vasiliev hurled a pebble triumphantly and it skittered lightly across the waves. He rested his chin upon his clenched fists.

"If only the old fool needed money!" he said aloud.

But therein lay Keith's security. He did not need money. He was president of the machinery company and financially secure for the rest of his days. But Vasiliev knew he had uncovered a possible line of action. For a long while he sat there by the lake and when at last he got to his feet and turned toward the town again his quick stride bespoke a purpose.

He made his way directly to an office on a side street. It was a neat little place with green curtains hung on a brass rod midway in the windows on either side of the door. Upon the glass one saw inscribed in gilt—

JOSEPH STROHM

There was nothing more than that. It was the epitome of dignity, of modesty, of reserve. Even Vasiliev seemed a little daunted by this arrogant simplicity for he hesitated a second before opening the door but with a shrug of his shoulders he entered the dim interior of the office.

There was an atmosphere of quiet efficiency. A sleek dark girl tapped smartly at a typewriter and there was a bowl of flowers on the desk. Everything was new, everything was in perfect order. There was nothing to indicate the nature of Mr. Strohm's business.

"Mr. Strohm in?"

"What name, please?"

"Vasiliev."

The girl tapped at a closed door and entered an adjoining office. She was back in a moment.

"Mr. Strohm will see you."

She contrived to make Vasiliev feel honored and he entered the sanctuary of Strohm gratefully.

His feet were on a rug like moss and beyond an enormous mahogany desk he saw a short, plump man in gray. This was Strohm, who rose and extended a moist, fat hand.

"I am indeed glad to meet you, Mr. Vasiliev," he said in a hushed voice. "Won't you sit down?"

Vasiliev sat in a heavily upholstered chair while Mr. Strohm magically produced a box of cigars. A match glowed, he puffed with relish.

Mr. Strohm did not immediately regain his seat. Instead he stood up by the desk, passing casual comments on the weather. He had a figure that was bulgy rather than fleshy, a face that was puffy rather than fat, eyes that were piggy rather than small. From the thin and sandy hair on his smooth cranium to the tips of his glistening shoes he was gross and smug. It was evident that he took great care in an endeavor to make his appearance pleasing and impressive by a nice taste in shirts and neckties and by an assiduous devotion to his barber and his manicure, but he could not eradicate the selfish lines about his mouth, could not extinguish the avid gleam in his little eyes, could not dull the flush of self-indulgence on his countenance.

"I have a proposition for you," said Vasiliev, abruptly. "You are a financier—you know money—and I think we can get together."

Mr. Strohm wearily flicked the cigar ash to one side.

"Many people come to me with propositions. What is it—mining?"

"Yes."

"You know where there is a rich claim and you want a grubstake. I'm afraid," said Mr. Strohm, in a tired voice, "I'm afraid at this time—"

"It's not as simple as that. Nor as small."

"Ah. Something big?"

"Tremendous."

Mr. Strohm looked at him curiously for a while, then went back and sat down at the desk. He locked his fingers together over his bulging waistcoat and leaned far back in the swivel chair, closing his eyes, cocking the cigar toward the ceiling.

"You seem in earnest, Mr. Vasiliev," he remarked, lazily. "Put your cards on the table."

Vasiliev did so.

For the next two hours the dark girl in the outer office explained to callers that Mr. Strohm was engaged in an important conference and could not be disturbed under any circumstances.

CHAPTER V

DISASTER

SEVERAL days later it came to Keith's ears that Vasiliev had left Haileybury and had gone up on the Red Lake rush.

"Just as I figgered," he said to himself, smiling. "He give up." Then he dismissed Vasiliev from his mind. But he did not, as Mr. Strohm quietly ascertained from day to day, make any move toward leaving town himself. He had told Vasiliev the truth when he said he had no intention of seeking the hill of gold. It was his secret and it pleased him to keep it, the illusion that he had beaten the North at last. It was a mild sort of mania with him.

Morning after morning he came to the office as usual, a vague pride in his heart as he unlocked the door with PRESIDENT inscribed upon it. Every one in town knew that Keith had little to do with the actual management of the company; he was no business man; his son, a square-jawed, energetic youth, was the moving force. Keith did little more than sign papers that were handed to him and occasionally take part in ponderous directorial meetings.

The company, so far as he knew, was prospering.

"We're gettin' along all right, ain't we Billy?" he would ask, anxiously, once in a while. "Sellin' lots of machinery, hey?"

"Fine," Billy would answer. "Competition is kinda stiff, dad, and we're just a new company but once we get over the hump we'll get along like a house afire."

"Don't want any of the boys to lose money through me, Billy. If it hadn't been for them sinkin' their money we'd never have no company at all, ye know. All friends of mine, Billy. Lots of them boys would be pretty hard hit if anythin' happened."

"No need to worry, dad. We've got a few notes outstanding but they'll give us lots of time. We'll likely get the Pike Lake Mine contract next week and that'll be the biggest one we've landed yet. Everything's all right."

So the old man was satisfied. As long as the friends who had put money into the company were protected he worried not. He knew that with some of them, friendship had overruled their better judgment and there had been predictions that Keith's notorious hard luck would pursue him in business as inevitably as on the trail; he was anxious to prove this verdict wrong.

Then, suddenly, Bill was forced to admit that everything was not all right.

"We lost the Pike Lake Mine contract, dad," he said, gloomily, one morning.

"Lost it, hey? How come?"

"The Imperial got it. Gave 'em a price we couldn't meet."

"Well, well. The Imperial, hey? Ain't our prices as low as any?"

"As low as we can make 'em. We've always been willing to take a low profit for the sake of getting the business but I'm hanged if I see how the Imperial gave 'em the price they did. They'll lose money on it sure."

Within a week two more contracts, which had been virtually assured, were lost to the Imperial. Regrets were expressed. But the Imperial had offered bids it would have been folly to refuse.

"They're tryin' to freeze us out," declared Billy.

"Who's behind this here Imperial?" asked the old man.

"Nobody knows. Montreal capital, I think."

"Kin we hold out? Don't want none of the boys to lose money, ye know, Billy."

"We could hold out easily if it happened at any other time. But here's these two big notes coming due and we've lost those contracts we were counting on."

"Thought ye said they'd give us more time?"

"I'm sure of it. But if they don't—it's good night."

"Go and see 'em, Billy. Make sure."

So Billy saw about the notes and when he came back to the office he slumped dejectedly into his chair.

"We're done for, dad!"

"Done for? How come, Billy?"

"Strohm has those notes"

"Strohm?"

"The shark! You know him. These people owed him money and he came on them sudden for it. Said he'd accept our notes. He's got us tied up in a bag."

"But how can he do that, Billy? We don't owe him no money."

"We do now. He's got our notes. Both of 'em. Unless he agrees to renew we're out of luck."

"But Billy—what does he want with our notes?" The old man was puzzled and confused. He could not make head nor tail of Bill's patient explanations. Business, he confessed, was like Greek to him.

"Go and see him, Billy?" he said, at last. "Go and see this fellow Strohm. Tell him he's got to renew them notes."

"Fine chance!" sniffed Billy. "I'll bet we'll find Strohm is one of the guys behind the Imperial. He's got us, dad. We haven't a chance in the world."

"Go an' see him, anyway. Can't let none of the boys lose any money on account of me, Billy."

BILLY called on Mr. Strohm, remarking that he might as well go and talk to an octopus, but when he returned he was frankly puzzled.

"What does he say, Billy?" inquired the old man, eagerly. "What does he say?"

"Hanged if I can figure it out, dad. He was as nice as pie. That greasy old money-lender acted as if he didn't care if we never paid those notes. Made 'em payable on demand but said he wouldn't push us."

"Well," said the old man, "I'm glad that's settled."

"Settled!" shouted Billy. "Settled, my eye! Listen, dad, do you realize just where we stand?"

For an hour Keith listened to figures. He wandered in a daze of dollar marks. His head ached. He understood very little of it all but at last Billy had dinned into his head the fact that the company was in a precarious position and that unless a contract they had been seeking from a Kirkland Lake company within the week materialized they would be at the mercy of Strohm.

"We're up against it bad," Billy concluded. "We've got to raise fifty thousand dollars. I don't know what Strohm's game is. He was smooth and nice to me. Said he had just taken over the notes as a matter of convenience, along with a lot of others, and that he was in no hurry for the money. He can't be behind the Imperial, as I thought, or he would have put the screws on us right away."

"Mebbe he isn't up to any game at all," said the old man, mildly.

"I know him. He's got something up his sleeve. Don't worry. We have to get those notes paid up and get on our feet in a hurry. We couldn't raise any more money I suppose?"

"Not from the boys. I wouldn't ask 'em. Wouldn't want it to get around that we was up against it, Billy."

"Well, we are up against it. If that Kirkland Lake contract doesn't come through I don't know what we'll do."

They waited, with alternating doubt and hope.

They lost the Kirkland Lake contract. The Imperial got it at a suicidal figure. Billy threw up his hands.

"That finishes us!" he declared, bitterly.

"Do you mean the company's busted, Billy?"

"It is if Strohm chooses to call those notes."

"Why then—then the boys will all be losin' their money, hey?"

"Most of it. We're in pretty deep. But who could figure losing all those contracts in a row. Almost any one of 'em would have helped us out a lot. Here we are with machinery on our hands, another note due from the bank next month and Strohm may come down on us like a thousand of brick any minute."

"Hmmm! Guess we'd better get busy and do somethin', hey Billy?"

"That's the worst of it. We can't do anything."

"I'll try and think of somepin', Billy." The old man ambled out of the office, his hands in his pockets. Bill wagged his head affectionately.

"Hopeless," he muttered. "He's hopeless. He's got no more idea how we stand right now than King Tut!"

HARD LUCK KEITH was surprised to find himself trembling as he left the office. It was time, he knew, to convert the hill of gold from an illusion into a fact.

The hill of gold would solve everything. It was their only hope.

And if there were no hill of gold at all!

He would not even have his precious illusion left then. The prospect was unthinkable. Not only would the company be wrecked, not only would his old friends lose the money they had invested on the strength of his name, but he would never more be able to walk down street in the morning telling himself that he had beaten the North at last because he owned a hill of gold!

Above that disquieting fear that there might be no hill after all rose the sinister shadow of his destiny of misfortune, in which he had by now come to believe so implicitly.

"But they couldn't take it away from me," he said to himself. "No one knows of it—no one but Vasiliev, and he's gone. Billy would see that it was handled right, in a business way. Nothin' fer me to do but go up and stake the claims."

The more he studied the matter the more clearly he saw that there was only one course open to him. In the hill alone lay their salvation—in that gorgeous hill that had captivated his imagination ever since the Indian had whispered his secret and died. For something must be done, he knew. He flinched at the very thought of the company's impending ruin. He would go down in the annals of the North as an unlucky man who had capped his luckless career by dragging his friends to disaster with him.

Even so, he was still undecided when he returned to the office for he was afraid of the consequences of failure. Billy was waiting for him.

"Strohm called up," he said. "Wants to see you."

"Wants to see me, hey?"

"Asked for the president of the company. That's you. Better go over now."

"What d'ye think he wants Billy?"

Billy shrugged. "Perhaps he's decided we're not a good risk," he said, gloomily. "Go and talk to him, dad. Go and talk to him."

So Keith went to talk to Strohm, his trepidation deepening when he was forced to wait in the outer office for fifteen minutes before being admitted to the presence of the financier. He could not imagine why Strohm should want to see him so shortly after his talk with Billy, and when the fat man went through the preliminaries of handshaking, cigar-lighting and weather discussion, without coming to the point, his anxiety increased.

At last Mr. Strohm was settled back in his swivel chair, the cigar cocked toward the ceiling, the fingers locked across his bulging waistcoat, Keith sat nervously on the edge of his chair.

"Well, Mr. Keith," remarked Strohm, affably. "I suppose you wonder why I asked you to come in and see me. It's about the notes, of course."

"Oh, yes. Them notes."

"Your son was over asking about them and I assured him I was in no hurry for the money. It's a big amount, so naturally I didn't care to fix any stated time for payment. I had to make them payable on demand. At the same time, Mr. Keith, I would have preferred to talk to you directly. You being president of the company—"

"Billy looks after most of the money end of it, ye see."

"I understand that. Perfectly. Perfectly, Mr. Keith. But still, you are the president. What I wanted to tell you was this, Mr. Keith." Here Mr. Strohm tilted down the swivel chair and leaned across the desk, chewing at the cigar. "I'm going to do the best I can to give you all the time you need on those notes—all the time you need—but there's a possibility, a bare possibility, that I may have to call them within a month or six weeks. I won't do it unless I really have to—but you know what business is. My money is pretty well tied up at present and there is just that chance that I may have to make use of those notes. Mind—I'm saying it's just a chance—but I thought it would be only fair to you to let you know well ahead of time. I believe in being fair in these things, so I'm telling you this so you won't be caught unprepared. I'm a fair man, Mr. Keith," orated Strohm, "and I wouldn't want to put any one in an unpleasant position—business or no business."

"It's good of ye to let me know."

"I'm glad you think so, Mr. Keith. I'm glad you think so. I try to be fair. Well," said Mr. Strohm, rising and shaking hands warmly, "that's all I wanted to tell you. All the time you want, if I can possibly arrange it—but there's just that chance that I might have to present those notes in a month—or six weeks. Good-by, Mr. Keith. Good-by."

He ushered the old man into the outer office, past the sleek stenographer, out into the street, slapping him affably on the back in the meanwhile and Keith found himself on his way to his own office before he fully realized that the interview was over.

A month or six weeks!

That didn't give them much leeway. He surmised that Mr. Strohm had taken this delicate way of informing him that the money would indeed be demanded at the end of that time. Still, he reflected, in his simplicity, it was mighty good for Strohm to even let them know that far ahead.

But the company was facing disaster. Of that there was no doubt. He had a month or six weeks in which to avert the crash.

On his way back to the office he made his decision. He stood at the crossroads of his life. At the end of one was a valley of shadow while the other rose to a glittering hill of gold.

His face was tense when he returned to Billy.

"Well, what is it? What did he say?"

"He gives us a month or six weeks."

"A month or six weeks! We're done for, dad. Done for."

"Mebbe," replied the old man grimly. "Me, I can't understand it all. I'm goin' on a little trip, Billy, I'm only in the way here. Fix it up as best as ye can. I'm goin' on a little trip."

CHAPTER VI

BLOOD AND GOLD

KEITH left town unobstrusively. He was taking no chances so he first went to Timmins, in the Porcupine field, then doubled back to the railway and went on to Cochrane at the junction of the T. & N. O. and the Transcontinental.

The maneuver was wasted effort.

A dissolute hanger-on of the mining camps by the name of Tibbs boarded the train the day he left Haileybury. Tibbs followed him to Timmins. Tibbs got drunk in the gold camp and very nearly missed his quarry but located him in Cochrane next day. Then, because he knew Keith's canoe by sight and because he nosed around the station baggage room until he saw that the craft had been checked through to an obscure station on the Transcontinental in northern Quebec, he was able to send a telegram of importance to Mr. Joseph Strohm.

Tibbs was very drunk in Cochrane for a week after Mr. Strohm reached the town in response to his message, because his master paid him well. Strohm was in a mood to pay him well, for although Keith had left Cochrane two days previous to Strohm's arrival, the plump financier found Vasiliev waiting when he reached the junction of the railways.

"Everything has worked out wonderfully so far," he said, rubbing his hands. "Wonderfully. Just as we planned. I put his company on the rocks—hinted that he had to have the money in six weeks at the most—and he started out directly."

"For the hill," said Vasiliev, hoarsely. He had been loafing about a little village up toward End-of-Steel ever since his departure from Haileybury, impatiently awaiting word from Strohm. He had reasoned that to set out for the hill of gold Keith must come first to Cochrane, since the Indian who had held the secret was from one of the James Bay tribes. The days of waiting had left him haggard and nervous.

"For the hill, of course," declared Strohm. "Where else? It's his only hope. Ah, now we can follow him!" His piggy eyes were shining with greed and excitement.

"He went on alone?"

"Alone. Yes."

"As I thought. It will be easier to make him come to terms."

Mr. Strohm chuckled. "He'll have no witnesses. And we'll have each other—eh Vasiliev?" He nudged his companion in the ribs. "Even if it ever came to law it would be his word against ours. Two to one." He shook with silent mirth and his eyes became mere slits.

"We'd best be off. We haven't any time to lose."

"No—you're right," said Strohm, immediately serious. "We can't dilly-dally like this. If we ever lose track of him—"

"We won't," Vasiliev assured him.

Next morning they left Cochrane and within the day had reached the little station on the railway, where they learned that Keith had gone north, following the river.

IT WAS a turbulent river and there were frequent portages; it was not long before Mr. Strohm regretted his insistence that he should be allowed to go with Vasiliev, for he was soft and flabby, his muscles unused to the toil of paddling and packing. But the thought of the hill of gold was like balm to his aching limbs. They struggled and the hill awaited them as an incredible goal.

Fresh, clean breezes swept about them and the trees along the river banks were misty green, backed by walls of spruce and balsam that towered to the horizon. They saw not the beauty for their hearts seethed with greed. As they pushed their way farther into the wilderness each man drew more and more into himself, each went on in a tense and eager silence, obsessed by the one purpose.

It was not difficult to follow Keith's trail. Vasiliev was a good bushman and each portage told him a story. His chief fear was lest Keith should delay, so that they might suddenly come in sight of him, but the old man was well in advance, continuing farther and farther up the river.

"The Indian said something about a creek," said Vasiliev to his companion. "I caught that much of what he said before he died."

"We should have followed closer. We may have passed the creek by now."

"Not yet."

They met an Indian that day who told them of seeing Keith in camp by the river the previous night and toward sundown they found the remains of the camp-fire at the mouth of a swiftly flowing creek.

"This must be the place," Vasiliev decided. "We'll have to take a chance on it."

"An expensive chance, if you're wrong," sniffed Strohm. He was jumpy and uneasy, fearful lest they should lose Keith's trail.

They stayed there that night and early in the morning set out up the creek. The stream was almost hidden by the dense tangle of undergrowth extending from either bank and Vasiliev turned the canoe directly into the screen of branches, which whipped their faces and rustled complainingly about them. The dense forest seemed to begrudge even the rapid water its winding path toward the river and a constant twilight seemed to overhang them. They seemed to be in a ravine of towering trees, so narrow was the stream.

At last the bush thinned out and the creek was flanked by high cold slabs of rock and tumbled boulders, all gray under a darkening sky. They came to a place where blackened embers showed some one had camped there but a short time before.

"This is the creek," said Vasiliev.

"Is the hill—do you think the hill can be far away?" Strohm was trembling with excitement.

"We'll have to go very carefully. He may be camping almost any place along here. We'd best wait until dark, then go on up-stream."

Strohm chafed at the delay but Vasiliev was insistent. They waited until night before going farther up the creek.

Then in the darkness they paddled on against the current. It was a black night and lowering clouds hid the stars. Strohm grew tired and fearful of the gloom. Vasiliev was a black shadow in the stern, steadily guiding the canoe into the darkness ahead.

A crimson pinpoint of light caught his eye. "Quiet!" he said, in a low voice.

The canoe crept on.

The pinpoint of light became larger. It was on the shore to the left. The embers of a camp-fire glowed in the night.

Never did Vasiliev paddle so cautiously as he did then. There was not a sound. At his whispered order, Strohm, the least experienced of the two, rested his paddle across the gunwales and sat motionless in the bow. The canoe slowly passed the somber smear of crimson and went on upstream until a bend intervened and the distant glow was hidden from their view.

"That's where he's camping," whispered Vasiliev. "He must have been there all day. We must be near the hill of gold."

A WHITE rock and a dead tree, the Indian had said, and Keith had found the place the previous afternoon.

He pitched his camp and went on up the hillside, through the undergrowth until he came out on top of the white rock that rose like a cliff from the borders of the stream.

It gave him a commanding view of the country beyond. Before him lay a bleak and hopeless sweep of barren rock, like a petrified sea, with sparse clumps of trees in the distance.

But of a hill there was no sign.

The country was perfectly flat; it was a huge plateau of boulders; the only eminences were the trees that rose on the far side of the dreary plain. A little weed lay directly across from him, an evergreen bush several acres in extent but the country all about it was flat and barren.

For a while he was bewildered. His worst fears assailed him in all their force. The Indian had told him the river he must follow, the location of the creek, the landmarks near the hill—he had not erred. But where was the hill?

To be sure, as the fellow died, he had tried to specify his instructions further. He had muttered something about the sundown, but to that Keith had paid little attention. He had, he thought, received sufficient directions. Once he reached the white rock it would be an easy matter to find the hill.

Puzzled, he gazed all about. The horizon was bare, save where the evergreen bush rose against the sky; elsewhere all was flat rock and tumbled boulders.

There was some connection between the white rock upon which he stood, and the setting sun. That he remembered, but the Indian had been unable to make it clear. It was close on sunset now and the glowing sphere was sinking in a welter of crimson beyond the evergreen bush. The tops of the trees were ragged silhouettes in the fiery glare.

He gazed patiently toward the west. The sun sank lower. He felt that he was making a fool of himself. What connection could the sunset have with the hill of gold? Superstition! An odd thought crossed his mind that perhaps this was some gigantic tribal jest—the sun itself at evening forming hills of gold among the clouds.

Suddenly he gave a mutter of astonishment.

The sun had gone suddenly down beyond the green bush. The trees were not dense and ordinarily the light would have gleamed redly through the trees but now the sun itself seemed to have disappeared, although it could not have reached the horizon. At the borders of the bush the trees stood darkly against the flaming sky, but in the center of the woods a great dark object rose against the sunset. It had been invisible before, shielded by the trees, but now it stood in blank relief as a crude, conical shape in the middle of the bush.

Keith left the flat rock and hastened down across the barren plateau, skirting his way among the tumbled boulders. The bush was but a few hundred yards away but in his excitement it seemed that he would never reach it and when at last he came into the lengthening shadow of the woods the object he had seen outlined against the sun had disappeared. It was hidden by the trees again but he scrambled through the undergrowth, into the depths of the bush.

There, at last, jealously surrounded by the trees that circled a little clearing, he came upon the hill of gold.

HIS knees were trembling. His hands shook as he moved about a tremendous dome of rock, touching here and there at irregular wrinkles and splotches that gleamed dully in the fading light.

The surface of the great dome literally glittered with gold. There was incalculable wealth in its seams.

He knelt on the ground by the hill, tearing away the moss that covered the sloping rock. Free gold in the enormous dome, free gold beneath the moss.

The hill was a monument to all the wealth of the Gold Country. It rose majestically in the middle of the bush, old and gray, beaten by the rains and snows and gales of many years—laden with riches.

Keith sat down on a fallen tree near by and gazed at the dome of rock. He felt weak with the access of his triumph.

The hill was about twenty feet in height and sloped gradually to its apex from the borders of the clearing. A glacial freak. Gold gleamed on its surface in tortured seams like the veins on the back of an old man's hand.

Keith got up and circled the dome of rock. He scrutinized the dull splotches, felt of them as though to assure himself that his eyes were not deceiving him. It was gold. There was no doubt of it. This hill was packed with gold and this little bush grew above a treasure house that culminated in the dome.

His eyes shone. His heart pounded with a wild elation. This was the end; this was the goal; this was what he had striven for these many years.

"It's mine," he muttered.

Twilight had fallen before he finally aroused himself to more definite action. Reluctantly, he left the somber dome of rock that rose gloomily from the clearing and made his way to the northeast corner of the bush. There he erected a discovery post, in a cairn of stones. He smoothed away a place at the top of the post with his knife, and therein wrote his name and the hour.

This asserted his claim to the hill of gold and would suffice for the time being. In the morning he would begin staking out his claims.

The next day was insufficient for the work, for he had a right to nine claims and this meant much labor, trudging across a great tract of country all around the golden hill. He had to put up his corner posts, pace out his distances, and when night came he still had work to do.

He was impatient to be on his way back down the river for he would not feel safe until he had reached the recording office.

He was sleeping when Vasiliev and Strohm passed up-stream in the darkness and when morning came he went out over the plateau of rock toward the green bush, confident that he was the only white man in all that wilderness.

He did not know when he left his camp that two pairs of eyes were watching.

He spent the day completing the staking of his claims, work that took him far afield. All day he was watched as he toiled in the glaring sun and he was watched as he came down across the plateau and vanished among the boulders toward the creek.

Had he even looked back before he went down to his camp he might have seen the two impatient figures making their way among the rocks, toward the clump of trees that masked the hill he had visited no less than half a dozen times that day.

AFTER supper he decided to return to the hill once again before setting out on his journey back to the railway. He had taken samples but, on looking them over, he was not entirely satisfied. They were rich but somehow they did not seem to do justice to the hill. He would go back, he decided, and get samples that were even more spectacular.

The sun had set when he returned across the plateau and the little bush looked gloomy and forbidding as he approached.

He chuckled to himself as he reflected that this uninviting copse of trees shielded a golconda from the eyes of men. The old Indian who had first stumbled on the secret kept it well. Unable to claim the gold himself because of his race he had kept knowledge of it from the hated whites. It belonged to Keith now—Hard Luck Keith, who had lived among the Indians and had known their ways and had been a friend to all of them.

He made his way toward the bush. As he reached the shadow of the trees he heard a sound that left him tense.

It was a voice!

His teeth clenched.

A voice? Here? He must be dreaming. Some passing murmur of the wind in the branches overhead. Some deceptive whisper of the undergrowth!

He heard it again. A human voice, gruff —the tones raised in anger.

He was overwhelmed by a fatalistic disappointment. His brain was swept by confusion. Silently, mechanically, he went forward.

There were two voices. He could distinguish words—

"You promised fifty-fifty!"

Vasiliev!

He recognized the voice immediately. He had known all along that Vasiliev was the man he must fight for the hill of gold. But how came he here at this time? And who was with him?

Then came a patient voice in oily tones—

"You misunderstood. Ten per cent. is all you get. You are just my agent—my guide—"

A splutter of wrath.

"Your guide! You fat crook! Would you have ever known of this place if it hadn't been for me?"

"Would you have ever found it if it hadn't been for me?"

Keith crept forward and peered through the branches. He saw Strohm and Vasiliev facing one another at the foot of the hill of gold.

He was immensely surprised when he saw Strohm. Then in a flash he divined the association between these two—they had forced him to seek the hill—they had followed. . . .

They were quarreling. Vasiliev's face was flushed with rage. Strohm, plump, imperturbable, was smiling.

"Here is the agreement you signed," he was saying, as he took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "At least it is a copy. You will notice that it reads no more than ten per cent—"

Vasiliev tore the paper from his hand.

"It's a fake!" he snarled. "You changed those figures—"

"Prove it."

"I'll go in with Keith and you won't get anything."

"Keith will laugh at you and you know it. Then you'll get nothing. Ten per cent. is better than that."

The old man saw Vasiliev reach swiftly for his hip. Metal flashed. A revolver pressed against Strohm's waist.

"Now," said Vasiliev, coldly. "We'll just change the figures on that agreement and put the date ahead. You won't put anything like this over on me."

Patiently, Strohm shook his head.

"You must stand by it."

"I'll give you five seconds. Then I'll blow you into Kingdom Come."

Mr. Strohm smiled sadly.

"One—two—three—"

"Ten per cent."

"Strohm, I'll kill you where you stand. Four—"

"No."

"Five!"

Vasiliev pressed the trigger.

It snapped dully. He pressed it again and again. The revolver was not loaded.

"I took the trouble to remove the shells," remarked Strohm, casually.

Vasiliev was at a loss for words or actions. He stared fixedly at Strohm for a moment. Then he turned on his heel and began walking toward the bush.

Old Man Keith, from his hiding place, could see Vasiliev's angry frown, could see the white, even teeth biting at the strong, black mustache.

Then, with a start of surprise, he saw that Strohm was drawing a revolver from his own belt.

"Where are you going?" Strohm called out, softly.

"To Keith!" snapped Vasiliev.

Strohm raised the revolver very deliberately and aimed it directly at the retreating figure.

Instinctively, the old man, hidden in the thicket, gave a cry of warning.

Vasiliev wheeled in his tracks. He plunged to one side as the weapon barked.

Then he sprawled on the ground as the revolver spoke again, the echo of the first shot roaring among the trees.

Vasiliev's right arm flung out. Something flashed in the gloom.

Strohm gasped.

His mouth twitched. His eyes stared. The blade of a hunting knife stuck full in his fat throat.

The revolver dropped from his fingers and clattered onto the rock. He swayed. He clutched vainly at the length of steel. Then he tumbled in a heap.

There was a bright splotch of blood on the hill of gold.

CHAPTER VII

PURSUIT

KEITH was silent, motionless with horror.

He saw Vasiliev stand for a moment, staring at the body slumped down by the base of the hill. Then Vasiliev wheeled about, peering anxiously into the bush. Keith could not move a muscle and with a hopeless resignation he saw Vasiliev quiver with surprise. The killer had seen him.

Vasiliev strode over toward the thicket his face twitching. The old man stood erect. They faced one another.

"I know I heard some one call out," said Vasiliev, dully.

Keith did not answer. Vasiliev went on—

"You saw it?"

The old man nodded.

Vasiliev's lips drew back from his strong teeth.

"He deserved it."

The old man found voice. He said, huskily—

"Neither of ye had any right here."

Vasiliev did not appear to hear him. He turned and regarded the supine body on the rocks. Strohm's head sagged horribly to one side and a pool of blood was widening.

"We've got to get together on this," he said.

The old man laughed, shortly.

"Get together?" he cried. "Do ye take me for a fool, Vasiliev? The two of ye were here to jump my claims. The fight was between ye both. It's a hangin' matter."

"But we've got to get together!" Vasiliev declared, excitedly. "If you keep quiet we can both have the hill—"

Resentment flamed in Keith's heart.

"It's my hill anyway," he snapped, scornfully. "Am I likely to keep quiet for such scum as ye are, Vasiliev? Am I likely to protect ye and let ye share in the claims ye would have stole from me if ye could?"

"You'd better," said Vasiliev, slowly and intensely. "Unless," he added, "you want to join *him!*"

He pointed toward the sprawled corpse by the hill of gold.

UP TO this time Vasiliev had been acting and talking like a man in a daze, but now he seemed to realize the situation in all its clarity. While Keith was still grasping the portent of the threat, understanding that his own death would be Vasiliev's only hope of escape, the murderer whirled about and plunged toward the corpse of Strohm.

In the limp hand of the dead man was the revolver!

Keith was unarmed. He followed instinct. He turned and fled. Branches slashed his face; he tripped and stumbled over roots and stumps; the undergrowth tangled about his legs; he dodged hither and thither, heading toward the outskirts of the bush.

He heard Vasiliev shout hoarsely.

The revolver banged. It sounded like a thunderclap in his ears. He careened over a stump, lurched, sprawled into a low clump of bushes on hands and knees, scrambled to his feet and crashed headlong into a wall of branches. They threshed about his head but he broke his way through.

He could hear the bushes far behind crackling and snapping wildly as Vasiliev plunged in pursuit.

The revolver barked viciously again.

The old man stumbled on through the undergrowth, and as he ran he cast a frightened look behind.

He could not see Vasiliev although he could hear his pursuer floundering through the brush.

Keith was panting. He could not keep this up long. If he remained in the bush, sooner or later he would give out. Vasiliev, he knew, was desperate now, bent on murder to shield murder. If he left the shelter of the woods he would be defenseless out on the barren, rocky plateau, without shelter, and he would be shot down. In his wild flight he found the way barred by a fallen tree. He was about to scramble over it when he hesitated, his eye catching the hint of a hollow in the dank grass that grew about the trunk. He plunged down into the grass, scrambling into the space beneath the tree. It was a mere depression in the earth, barely enough to accommodate his slight body, but he wriggled into the hollow, reaching out at the same time to brush back the tall grass so that it would again conceal his hiding place.

He was just in time. Footsteps thudded in the earth. Twigs snapped. He could hear the labored breathing of Vasiliev as the fellow came running out of the bush, straight toward the fallen tree.

He waited in agony.

Vasiliev pounded along through the heavy grass and then his footsteps became slower.

Keith caught his breath. Had he left a clear trail through that grass?

Vasiliev moved about uncertainly. Keith heard him clear his throat. He glanced sideways and his heart jumped as he caught a glimpse of his pursuer's heavy boot, not five inches away.

Vasiliev stood there for a few seconds. Keith lived a century.

Then Vasiliev suddenly leaped over the fallen tree and went hastening on through the undergrowth, with twigs and branches crackling at his heels. The old man was weak with relief. He lay there in his cramped refuge, sweat standing out on his forehead, listening to the retreating footsteps of the murderer.

"Can't stay here long," he told himself.

If Vasiliev failed to find him in the woods he would lie in wait for him at the camp. Keith knew the fellow would shoot him at sight. His only hope was to get to the camp first and take instant flight down the creek.

He listened, anxiously.

Vasiliev was still in the deep bush, some distance away by now. He was systematically beating through the undergrowth.

Keith crept out of his hiding place, raised his head above the level of the grass, and looked cautiously around.

The way was clear.

He made his way carefully through the grass, toward the outskirts of the little wood. Everything depended on silence. He crept swiftly, yet noiselessly as an Indian, his feet avoiding the dry twigs on the ground, his arms pushing aside the branches at his side.

In the distance he could still hear Vasiliev searching for him, hunting as assiduously as a bloodhound, and with a heart as merciless.

Keith crept on through the bush until at last he emerged from the undergrowth at the verge of the woods and faced the bare plateau between him and the river. It was twilight, but the great expanse of rock was as open as a blank page.

He started across the barren space. There were boulders here and there that afforded some slight shelter and he ran from one to the other, occasionally crouching down and looking back. The outlines of the bush were becoming blurred with approaching night but there was no sign of Vasiliev.

Keith was half-way across the plateau when Vasiliev emerged from the woods, revolver in hand. He caught sight of the old man at once, running across between two great boulders, and at that he gave a shout of triumph.

He leveled the revolver and fired.

The bullet chipped off a bit of rock that skittered close by Keith's feet. The old man glanced behind, dodged to one side, then fled across the intervening space toward the river. He did not try to seek the shelter of the boulders, but he ran zigzagging this way and that, across the rocks. Once he slipped and fell but he was up again in a moment, unconscious of his torn and bleeding hands.

Vasiliev fired again but again he missed that fleeing target and when once more he pressed the trigger it snapped on an empty chamber. He cursed. There were shells in his pocket. Strohm's revolver was a .38, as was his own, and swiftly he loaded the weapon. This took time, and when he took up the pursuit again, Keith had disappeared beyond the rim of the rock.

THE old man slid and stumbled down the hillside toward the camp by the creek. Every instant he expected to hear the bark of the revolver behind him again. All his energies were bent on gaining the camp before Vasiliev should come within sight from across the plateau.

He plunged down among the rocks, tore through the undergrowth and came within sight of his camp. The canoe was drawn up on shore; his rifle lay across his packsack. He reeled, stumbled, fell upon the weapon, then turned.

His eyes scanned the top of the slope and at that moment the tall figure of Vasiliev was silhouetted there against the steely sky of twilight. The old man pulled the trigger—not to kill but to wound—but the light was uncertain.

The effect, however, was immediate.

Vasiliev heard the whine of the bullet past his ears and he flung himself down among the rocks. Down in the shadows by the river, with the tall trees overhanging, he could scarcely discern the old man, but at last he saw him, crouched by the canoe, the rifle at his shoulder. He flung up the revolver.

Keith fired again.

There was a spatter of rock dust in Vasiliev's face. He realized that he was not well hidden and for the next moment all his attention was devoted to concealing himself and he wriggled back up over the slope, into the shelter of two great boulders.

The old man had gained his end. He had driven Vasiliev to cover and that sufficed for the time being. He concealed himself in the bushes and lay there, the rifle trained on the boulders, patiently waiting for darkness.

For five minutes neither made a move. Then Vasiliev cautiously peeped out of his hiding place.

A bullet clipped through the brim of his hat. Hastily he withdrew.

The twilight deepened. Shadows melted with the black waters of the river and gloom veiled the hillside.

The old man left the shelter of the bushes. He had the advantage, for the boulders were still apparent at the top of the slope, but darkness obscured the river bank. He put his packsack into the canoe. The paddles were in place. His tent was still on shore but it would have to be left behind. He folded up the blankets, however, and carefully put them in the bottom of the canoe. He had moved noiselessly and there had been no sound from the top of the slope.

Then Keith moved swiftly and with no regard for silence. He shoved the canoe out into the water, the keel grating with a clattering uproar over the pebbles. He leaped into the stern, grasped a paddle and sent the frail craft out into mid-stream.

A stabbing little flash of light came from among the rocks, a bullet flipped into the water with a splash.

Keith turned the canoe down-stream, rested his paddle across the gunwales, and snatched up the rifle. He fired back toward the place where the light had flashed as the revolver barked. There was a great crashing among the branches about the camp. Rocks were bumping and rolling down the slope and splashing into the water.

He picked up the paddle again and bent low in the stern. The blade rose and fell in short, powerful strokes. The canoe skimmed across the water into a friendly wall of darkness.

Vasiliev, back on shore, emptied his revolver after the vague shape of the canoe that sped away into the gloom. But he knew he was beaten. Keith had escaped him. Keith would reach the railway first and register his claim to the hill of gold. Keith would tell of the murder of Strohm.

An appalling dread descended on him. He was possessed by a ghastly panic.

He turned and ran up the shore toward his own camp. Trees and bushes extended out over the water. He crashed into them, unseeing, stumbled into the water, slipped and fell among the rocks, sprawled into the shallows, picked himself up and plunged on up the shore.

One purpose pounded at his mind.

He must overtake Keith. The old man must never reach the railway.

Vasiliev scrambled along the bank of the creek. His heart was thudding. His mouth was dry and hot. His eyes were staring. When at last he reached his own camp he snatched up his rifle and blankets, flung them into the canoe, pushed the light craft out into the water, and then paddled desperately down-stream in pursuit of Keith.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FLOODED FOREST

NIGHT seldom held terrors for Keith. Many times he had traveled in the wilderness after dark, in the rain of spring, the moonlight of summer, the gales of autumn, the blizzards of winter. The uncanny changes that darkness makes in the forests, rivers and mountains, affected him not at all.

But this night it was different. His nerves were taut. Death crept behind him. The darkness that enveloped him was haunted with formless terrors.

The creek was very quiet. The rocky banks rose like mysterious walls, without shape or substance and the lucent sky above was like the skylight to a prison. His paddle rose and fell and water swirled that sent the craft leaping ahead. The current was with him and he made good progress, but he knew that the current was with Vasiliev as well.

The silence was profound. It was the silence of a dead world. It was a silence that aroused insane and abominable fancies; it seemed as if he were the only man left on earth, paddling through eternal blackness down an interminable river.

Once in a while some animal would rustle through the bushes at the water's edge; it would be a sound quick, significant of fear. Keith would feel his muscles twitch. Fear ruled the wilderness at night and this time he was under its spell. So was Vasiliev, paddling desperately behind, with the ghost of Strohm demanding further blood from the shadow of the hill of gold.

When he left the creek and glided out onto the open river he had devised a plan.

Over to the east, on the Chibouc River, men had been building a great dam. It was to be a colossal reservoir and the construction had been going on for close on two years. A railway had been built from the main line of the Transcontinental to the point on Chibouc where the workers toiled at the mammoth dam.

"If," he reflected, "I can portage over to the Chibouc and paddle down to where they're buildin' this here dam I can take the train to the main line. I'll beat Vasiliev out to Cochrane by hours."

This was his scheme, its only drawback being the night portage to the other river. But he knew of a place where the two rivers were but a mile apart, although a swamp lay between, and he resolved to take the chance. If he tried to race Vasiliev directly to the main line he would fail, for the fellow was younger. Keith, sturdy old bushman though he was, knew that the years had robbed his muscles of their resiliency and his body of its strength. He was no match for his pursuer in such a race.

His only hope was to outwit the man who hastened on his trail. If he lost, it meant death, for only by his death could Vasiliev escape the consequences of Strohm's murder, only by his death could Vasiliev win the hill of gold.

Shadows lay heavily across the river, reaching out from the wooded shores and there was a dim moon which left a ragged pathway of light in the middle of the stream. He forged his way on through the appalling stillness, the terrible blackness, following the course with practised eye, guiding his craft swiftly down the winding waterway.

IT MUST have been after midnight when he came to the place where he would portage over to Chibouc.

He discerned it by an abrupt break in the gloomy skyline to his left, a deep depression in the wooded bank, and he turned the canoe toward the shore. The shingle grated beneath the keel. In the dim light he peered about him. He had judged correctly. He was at the entrance to a little valley, a dark and gloomy place, and there was a trail of sorts through there, across the swamp to Chibouc.

He folded up his blankets and lashed them inside the canoe, put the light pack upon his back, then raised the canoe upon his shoulders. The weight was considerable, for he was tired, but by a judicious method of balancing, acquired by years of practise, he was able to lessen the strain upon his muscles. Then, bowed under the burden, he strode forward into the valley.

It was pitchy dark between the hills and he had never been over the trail before. Overhanging branches banged smartly at the bottom of the canoe. He had to pick his way carefully for a loose stone might have meant his downfall.

The moon came out from behind a cloud and showed him the faint path ahead, winding on up the hill. He set his jaw for the climb. The canoe swayed from side to side. His knees bent under him. Sweat streamed down his forehead into his eyes. He struggled upward.

"Not in the shape I used to be," he muttered. Keith could remember the time when he would have packed a canoe up such a slope without turning a hair.

Pebbles rolled under his feet, went tumbling down the hill. The canoe brushed through leaves and branches with a scraping sound that was intensely clear in the still night. This disturbed him for he knew he was still within sight of the river and Vasiliev might be along at any time.

His heart was pounding, his throat felt full and hot when at length he reached the top of the slope. He put down the canoe and rested for a moment. Far below he could see the smooth black river, the moonlight glinting on water like onyx and the forest rose in dark magnificence beyond. The hooting of an owl in the somber distance was a lonely sound that rang sadly through the deep stillness.

There was no sign of Vasiliev. Keith felt a momentary elation. "I've shook him all right, I guess," he said to himself, and when he was rested he resumed his burden and went on his way toward the swamp.

The moon was low in the sky and clear of the clouds. Keith was at the top of the slope, an ungainly figure beneath the swaying canoe.

Vasiliev, paddling desperately around the river bend, caught a fleeting glimpse of this strange apparition silhouetted against the silver sphere, before Keith went on down the other side of the hill, into the maw of darkness.

Had Vasiliev been a moment later he would have missed it. He would have continued on down the river, unconscious of the old man's ruse.

But luck, as he considered it, was with him.

"Trying to give me the slip, eh!" he said. "Going over to the Chibouc."

A twist of the paddle and his canoe sped toward the shore.

THE swamp was a nightmare.

Burdened by the canoe, Keith left the high ground and descended into an area of dank grass and low bushes. The grass gleamed like strips of silver under the moon. The ground became softer underfoot. His heavy boots squelched in mud.

Mosquitoes were buzzing about his head by now, with a low and persistent humming. His hands gripped the gunwales of the canoe so he was powerless against them. The insects swarmed about him in a cloud, lighting on his face, his neck, his hands, stinging him incessantly. He suffered them in silence.

There were patches of open water that glinted evilly in the uncanny light, and these he skirted, going ankle deep into mud that clung to his feet. A croaking of frogs rose throatily on the night air from far ahead. He passed by a little cedar grove and the sweet odor was grateful after the stench of the marsh border.

Before long he came to a place where a great expanse of dead bushes lay before him, rising from a soggy mass of mud and water and dry grass and he plunged into this frightful desert with faltering stride. He did not know whether or not he was on the right trail—indeed there was no trail at all—and the end of it might be that he would sink into a morass from which escape would be impossible. The canoe became heavier with every step.

The dry dead branches threshed about his knees. The ground shook like jelly and yielded to his tread. Mud gripped his boots like a million clamorous fingers. A feeling of intense loathing rose within him, a violent disgust for this sepulchral place that he was traversing.

The canoe appeared to be forcing him down into the soft earth. Its weight was tremendous now. The mud was close to his knees. It was an effort to raise either foot. He floundered and struggled. The mud sucked at his boots like a live monster.

Once he stumbled headlong and for a terrible minute he was pinned beneath the canoe, flat in the mud. He was almost suffocated before he managed to exert all his strength in a violent effort to raise himself. Then he was standing upright again, knee-deep in the cloying swamp, struggling to get free and finally with a wrench and a lurch he was plunging on his way again.

It seemed interminable but at last he came to firmer ground and there he rested, his breath coming in deep sobs. The moon had gone behind a cloud and the terrible swamp was just a dark blot in the night gloom. When he felt able to go on again he rose wearily and hoisted the canoe over his head. Then he struggled on up a rocky slope.

When he reached the top of the slope he saw the Chibouc lying far below in the valley. The hillside was wooded but the going was not so difficult and he made his way down toward the stream with a sigh of relief. It was still quite dark but he made few missteps and bore the canoe down-hill with mechanical precision.

At the river he rested again for a little while. His eyes were smarting for want of sleep. His body was sapped of strength. He was not refreshed when he finally shoved the canoe out into the stream but he dashed cold water into his face and then stepped into the stern.

This was the last lap of his flight. By morning he would reach the Chibouc Dam.

CLOUDS dotted the sky and the black walls of trees closed in on the river. Stream, shores and forest lost outline, were deprived of their entities and became an amphitheater of sibilant darkness.

The canoe slipped smoothly through the gloom, through the invisible waves, past the indistinguishable ranks of trees into the black gulf of night. Water dripped and splashed lightly from his paddle.

To Keith, crouching in the stern, it had become an endless and senseless repetition of futile labor for the darkness gave no hint of progress and the canoe seemed to float motionless in a great cavern. He labored toward a goal invisible and passed nothing, drew away from nothing, drew closer to nothing on the way. Once in a while, as though to assure himself against this incredible supposition, he looked up to the ragged line of tree-tops that marked a vague boundary between forest and sky; and that rigid and uneven silhouette imparted an instant sense of motion to the craft. When he looked down again he seemed once more to be vainly struggling toward a silent and unattainable destination that existed only in his mind, toiling wearily under the grave gaze of the encompassing forest.

He was almost asleep. He had traveled far and he was very tired. His arms rose and fell stiffly. It was not ordinary weariness that possessed him now; it was a drugged fatigue, an overwhelming exhaustion. He had been paddling so steadily for so many hours that he began to think he might fall asleep and paddle on and on through sheer habit and automatic response. He smiled faintly as he thought of arriving thus at Chibouc Dam, crouched dead asleep in the stern, paddling with clockwork precision, like a corpse obstinately refusing to acknowledge death.

There was a cold breeze. Morning must be near. He could hear the wind stirring the leaves and branches and rippling the waters until the great dark cavern in which he toiled was alive with frightened whisperings.

Instinctively his mind caught at the fact that despite the lightness of the breeze the disturbance of the water was profound; the rippling was not the rippling of a sluggish stream in the morning wind but that of a lake. The wind seemed to be brushing across a great expanse of water and it had an edge to it, chillier by far than the exhalations of the forest.

As time passed a gray veil rose out of the water and darkness left the sky. Night was creeping from the woods. Mists were rising.

As the light increased, the outlines of the forest became even more obscure than they had been by night for a heavy fog blotted the river. Keith could only see the little patch of smooth water immediately ahead of the canoe. Beyond that everything was gray, with distorted shapes rising like abrupt grotesques once in a while near by.

An hour passed and the fog was impenetrable. Keith was puzzled. He sensed a change in the river. He could not define it but instinct told him there was something wrong.

He rested the paddle across the gunwales and peered into the mist. At that instant the bow of the canoe collided heavily against something rigid. The light craft quivered violently as though afraid.

For a moment he thought he had run ashore or against a rock, but then he saw that it was a tree, rising directly out of the river. He gaped. Not a dead tree, but a tall poplar, growing up from the water. The branches swept across his face as the canoe drifted and he ducked to a swishing of leaves and bending twigs.

Then he saw that there were other trees growing from the water all about him. He backed water, but the stern of the canoe thudded dully against an unyielding body.

Just then the wind negligently drifted the mists away for a moment and the veil lifted slightly, enough to reveal the serried ranks of tree trunks on all sides. The water gleamed and from the water jutted scores of these straight, slender pillars, before him, behind him, to right and to left.

It was incredible.

Keith saw that he had drifted somehow into an immense lake—a lake from which grew a forest. The tree trunks near at hand were vaguely distinguishable and then they merged to an infinite mass in the foggy distance.

He was utterly bewildered. The river had vanished. There were no banks. He began to wonder if he had ever been on the river at all.

There remained only a smooth floor of steely water under the mist, a floor studded with innumerable trees.

Nothing like it had ever happened before. He wondered if he dreamed. The river had vanished; it had become a lake in which a forest grew.

He felt aggrieved at this miracle. Nature had deliberately cheated him. He had trusted in a stream to remain a stream and it had lured him into strange and frightful waters; its friendly and invisible banks had slipped away from him in the darkness and the fog and had left him lost on an unknown sea. He felt the fear of the incomprehensible. The foundation of all things, the accepted order, had been abruptly and inexplicably swept away; all his cunning, all his instinct, all his skill was set at naught.

"Queer!" he muttered.

The sound of his voice was comforting. At least he was not dreaming.

A gust of wind stole through the trees and all the forest rustled and shook in an infinite inanity; gray waters lapped against hundreds of tree trunks and sloshed soggily against the wet leaves of the undergrowth.

He dipped the paddle into the water, straight down, and the blade struck bottom less than three feet beneath the surface.

He grinned, ashamed of his first tremors.

"River must 'a' run over its banks," he said, audibly. "The bush is flooded."

And at that moment, from the depths of the fog, he heard a cry—a childish cry, wild with terror.

CHAPTER IX

RISING WATER

KEITH peered into the mist.

The cry was repeated. It was a solitary wail of agonizing fear and it came from somewhere among the flooded trees.

"Sounds like a youngster," he muttered.

At any rate it meant that there were human beings near, people of whom he could inquire his whereabouts and who would put him right on his way toward Chibouc Dam again. He gazed about and saw that although the bush was flooded he was in a poplar forest that had very little undergrowth. The water was not high enough to reach the branches of the trees, otherwise progress in a canoe would have been impossible. He judged that he could make his way through the bush by paddling, although the risks at best were great for at any time some projecting stump or limb might upset his canoe.

He turned in the direction of the wailing cry, which was now repeated again and again.

It was uncanny, paddling through this forest, with the silent trees ranged all around him, the water lapping at their slender trunks. Now and then he had to skirt clumps of low bushes that just rose above the surface, occasionally fallen trees barred his way, but at length he came to a sort of avenue in the wood, where there was open water, trees ranged along either side. This was evidently a flooded road and he followed it through the rising mists that steamed and swirled above the surface of the water.

In time he saw a small cabin at the end of the lane of water. There had been a fence around the place but now it was inundated. He distinguished the place where the gate had been and paddled triumphantly through it.

From the cabin the cries ensued.

Crouched in the doorway of the log building he saw a small boy, a lad of ten or twelve years who stared at him with wide and tearful eyes. He was a shock-headed little chap, in a ragged pair of breeches and equally ragged shirt, and he had been crying but now he stared solemnly as Keith approached.

The canoe bumped against the threshold of the door.

"What's the matter?" asked the old man.

"Thought I was goin' t' get drowned," the child piped.

"How?"

The boy's eyes widened. He gestured to the water that covered the yard about the cabin, that gleamed through the trees of all the surrounding forest.

"Water's comin' up," he replied.

Keith stepped out of the canoe into the doorway, slipping the chain about a convenient nail. The interior of the cabin was still dry but he saw that the place was empty. There was no stove, not a stick of furniture.

"How come ye to be here?" he asked. "And why is the water risin'?"

The child had followed him into the cabin and now stood before him, looking up with candid eyes.

"Pa 'n' ma and the rest of the kids moved out yesterday," he told Keith. "They've finished the big dam at Chibouc, see? The water's been risin' ever since mornin' so they told us we had to get out or we'd be drowned. 'Course they made it good with pa—but we had to get out just the same."

"But they didn't leave you behind?"

The boy shook his head.

"No, I sneaked back here this mornin'. I forgot my knife. The one I got at Chris'-mas, see!" He delved into a pocket and produced a battered blade, holding it out proudly for Keith's inspection.

"How did you get back?"

"Walked. The water wasn't very high then. I figgered I could get here and back again before it hit the road. But gosh she come up fast. I get in here and by the time I found my knife the water was up in the yard." The lad wagged his head seriously. "By golly I thought I was done for. So I started hollerin' and I hollered and hollered and nobody come and I was just about ready to give up and climb out on the roof when you come along. Take me back up the road, eh mister! I mean the place they've got marked out to show the water won't go up no higher. Of course, all around here—" he waved vaguely, "it's all done for. It's goin' to be all under water after this. Where'd you come from, mister? Funny you ain't heard about the dam. If you come down river this mornin' you took a mighty big chance. But say, let's get outa here, eh mister?"

The situation was quite clear to Keith now. With completion of the dam the waters of the Chibouc had been backed up by the closing of the sluices. That explained the flooding of the forest, explained why he had blundered in among the trees when he had fancied himself safe out on the open river. It was a miracle that he had not continued on down the stream. He might have been swept over the dam. But for the accident of hearing the child's cry he might have sought to regain the river and been carried to his death.

The child was waiting impatiently.

"How far away is the railway?" the old man asked.

The boy shrugged.

"It ain't far. You take me out of this, up the road to where pa and ma are stayin' up by the workmen's houses and it ain't but a little piece to the railway. The dam ain't far from here, see!"

"All right, son, I guess we'd better be gettin' started."

Keith strode over to the door.

He froze with astonishment. He stared out over the inundated yard. His eyes widened. His hands clenched convulsively.

For there, in the gateway, was a canoe. And in the canoe crouched Vasiliev, a rifle at his shoulder.

THE old man jumped back into the doorway at the instant the rifle spoke. A bullet thudded into one of the logs and a chip dropped into the water.

Keith would never forget the startling appearance of his pursuer. Vasiliev was covered with mud from head to foot. He too had crossed the swamp. He was unshaven, his eyes were red-rimmed, his clothes were torn and dirty. There was a look of maniacal intensity on his face.

Vasiliev too had been lost on the river. Vasiliev had found the lane of water among the trees, the lane that had at one time led from the cabin to the river bank, and had followed it. With a thrill of incredulous surprise he had recognized Keith's canoe outside the building as he came through the gate and the next moment Keith himself appeared in the doorway. Then Vasiliev shot.

The old man sprang back into the cabin. He was unarmed. His rifle was in his own canoe, outside the door.

Vasiliev paddled closer.

Keith realized that he was trapped. He had not even been able to close the door.

He looked wildly about. The youngster, his mouth oval with amazement, his eyes round with fear, was standing beside him.

"Behind the door, quick!" ordered the old man, shoving the lad away from him. The boy scampered for shelter.

The window on the far side of the cabin caught his eye. If he could make his escape and regain his own canoe, once get his hands on the rifle, he would have a chance. He sprang over toward the window.

There was a dark square space in the middle of the floor, where a trapdoor leading to the cellar had been removed. Just as he was beside it he saw Vasiliev again. The man had paddled directly up to the door of the cabin. The rifle was aimed at Keith.

He had no chance of escape.

Even as he tried to leap across the open trap the rifle barked.

Keith felt something pluck at his side. Weakness assailed him. His head was perfectly clear but he could not make his muscles respond to his will.

The black hole in the floor shot up toward him. He tried to clutch at the boards but they evaded his fingers.

Then he tumbled down through the opening. Cold water struck him with a shock. He sank down into blackness.

VASILIEV lashed his canoe by the threshold and came into the cabin, rifle still in hand. He went over to the trap and peered down.

It was very dark in the cellar. He caught the gleam of water but nothing more.

For a long time he waited there, listening. There was no sound.

At last he bent down. He saw that there was a crude ladder leading from the flooded bottom of the cellarway up through the opening in the cabin floor. He dragged this ladder up through the trap, brought it over to the door of the cabin and flung it outside into the water.

Then he smiled.

There was no doubt of it. Keith was

dead. Vasiliev had converted defeat into victory. The hill of gold was his now. Strohm and Keith had been in his way. Both were gone. Keith's body lay in the flooded cellar of this obscure and deserted cabin, and would never be found.

Thoughtfully, Vasiliev went over to the doorway and looked out. No one had seen him. There was only a great expanse of water gleaming through half-inundated trees, and the lane of water led to the river. He gave up the idea of seeking the mainland in order to inquire his way. Better to return to the river and paddle on, anything to get away from this place.

He got back into his canoe and paddled off through the yard, a weary smile of triumph on his cruel face.

AFTER Vasiliev had disappeared from sight among the trees, the little boy peeped out from behind the door. He glanced fearfully around, then tiptoed across the floor toward the trap. There he knelt, speaking in a hoarse whisper—

"Mister! Mister! Are you there, mister?"

There was no answer.

"Mister!" cried the child, frightened.

A labored sigh rose from the darkness. Then an old and weary voice—

"Is—is he—gone?"

"Yes, he went away mister. Did he shoot you? He didn't see me at all for I hid quiet behind the door. You can come up now, mister."

"I'm—hurt!"

The child peered down into the gloomy cellar. He could distinguish a gray face, a pair of groping hands that clung to the wet earth walls.

"Can't you get out?"

"Lower—the ladder. Perhaps I can—make it."

The child looked all around. The ladder was gone. He ran to the door, remembering that Vasiliev had cast it away into the yard but it had disappeared. He came back to the opening in the floor.

"He took the ladder away," explained the child shrilly. "You can't climb out, can you?"

As his eyes grew accustomed to the light he saw that Keith was standing waist deep in water. The old man came splashing over toward the trap and raised his hands but they fell far short of the opening in the floor.

"Isn't there anything?" he asked, and the boy saw that his face was contracted with pain. "Isn't there a rope—a pole?"

Wildly, the little boy looked all around, then shook his head.

"There ain't a thing, mister. Pa took everythin' away."

"You'll have to—go for—help," gasped the old man. "I'm wounded—and the water's rising—down here. Can't ye—can't ye handle a canoe?"

"I'll try."

"Be keerful in it, lad. I wouldn't let ye go—but there's no other way. Get help—or I'll be—drowned."

Without a word, trembling with excitement, the boy leaped to his feet and went over to the door. He peeped out. Vasiliev had disappeared. The old man's canoe was tethered by the door.

Once in a while, as a special favor and under strict supervision, the lad had been allowed to paddle his father's canoe about the little bay at the end of the lane, so he was not wholly unused to the craft. Carefully, he took his place in the stern, gingerly dipping the paddle into the water. The canoe swung out across the flooded yard, he guided it through the gate somehow and then turned it up the lane of trees that led toward what was now the mainland.

THE darkness of the cellar was formidable and the distant square of light that marked the opening in the floor above was a mockery.

Keith was weak in body and confused in mind. He was standing waist deep in water, leaning against the muddy walls of his strange prison, holding himself erect with all his flagging strength. He was wounded, he could feel blood on the side of his shirt, and his ears were ringing. He found it difficult to think definitely. His mind persisted in seizing on all sorts of obscure ideas. The opening in the floor exerted a hypnotic effect upon him; he regarded it hopelessly. It was unattainable.

The water, he knew, was rising. He could hear it trickling through some opening in the walls. He tried to locate the place but when he moved the effort left him suddenly weak.

He dug his thumb into the mud at the water-line, leaving a depression. About an inch above he made another depression, and farther up he made another. This was to register the rise of the water.

He was wretchedly weak.

Vasiliev had won after all. The hill of gold had been snatched away. The old man smiled faintly and grimly. That was his destiny. To find gold for others. It had always been that way. He had known it from the beginning.

Even if he were rescued from this place, Vasiliev would beat him in the race for the recording office, for Keith knew that his wounds would require attention—perhaps days would pass before he could go out to the railway. Possession is nine points of the law. The man who records first is the man who wins. Vasiliev would win.

Keith saw himself returning beaten. The company was wrecked. His friends had lost their money. He had lost his hill of gold. The North had crushed him utterly and he was an old man.

It did not matter very much if he were not rescued.

After a while his trembling fingers fumbled for the depression in the wall. He found it, directly at the water-line, then groped for the one above. It was there, but there was no third water-mark. His hand brushed the wet wall impatiently. Then he groped beneath the water and found the first depression he had made.

So! The water was indeed rising. And very rapidly too. If it rose above his head he would have to swim until the water brought him within reach of the edges of the trap. But he knew that in his weakened condition that was out of the question. He would not last three minutes.

He was utterly discouraged, profoundly weak and weary. It was the end. His destiny of misfortune was culminating here, in this foul, dark cellar, with water creeping mercilessly about him. The hill of gold, that splendid illusion which had enriched the last few months, had lured him to this ignoble finish.

Dully he began to scrape another hole in the wall, to mark the inevitable rise of water, then another and another. He noticed that the water had risen to the level of the second depression he had originally made.

Minutes passed.

The water, which had been at his waist when the boy left, was now about his chest, and he was so weak that he was clinging to the wet walls for support. Even should the boy reach the mainland safely, Keith knew he could expect no help for many minutes yet. Judging by the rate of the water's rise he would be drowned by then.

He groped toward the marks in the wall. The third depression was covered.

CHAPTER X

THE OPENING OF THE SLUICES

TIME ceased to have any meaning. The old man clung to the slimy wall in the gloom and the water rose about his armpits. He had given up hope.

Another little hole in the wall had disappeared.

He remained on his feet by sheer will power. There seemed to be not a vestige of strength remaining in his body. In a rough sort of way he had bound up the wound in his side with a handkerchief and a strip torn from his shirt. He did not know whether or not the wound was serious. He knew he had lost blood.

In all the peril of this damp and gloomy prison he found his thoughts reverting constantly to the hill of gold. It seemed incredible that he had lost it after all. It had been the majestic goal of all his bitter years, the colossal prize that compensated for all his trials and defeats. And he had lost it.

"Luck!" he muttered, over and over again.

He thought of a day when he had said to Vasiliev, "Why should I not leave my destiny alone?" He should have left his destiny alone and destiny would not have revenged herself so cruelly.

The water was at his throat.

His clutching hands slipped along the wet walls. He almost sank into the depths. His fingers scrabbled at the mud. He clung for a hold.

The last depression he had marked in the wall was now under the level of the water.

He might have let himself go, might have let himself sink back to end it all at once but some instinct kept him clinging vainly there. He wondered if he could swim over to the place beneath that square of light and try to reach for the edges of the trap. He essayed a move and knew that he had not strength to reach that far. Even so, the trap was too far above the water-line.

The sluices down at Chibouc Dam were all closed and the country above the great concrete barrier was being slowly flooded as the waters of the river were thrown back upon its banks.

Again he reflected on his destiny, that had brought him down the Chibouc on this day of all days.

The water was at his chin.

He had to hold back his head to keep his mouth above the level.

It would soon be over.

His fingers slipped from the wall and he slid down into the water. For a moment he was submerged, and then he struggled up, gasping. The shock of the cold water about his head seemed to revive him from a lethargy that had been creeping about him.

Let the water come!

He was ready for it. There was nothing left in life for him now that he had lost his hill of gold.

He waited.

A long time went by. The water was still at his chin but it had gone no higher.

He fancied that he must have misjudged. It had seemed that minutes passed but no doubt it had been merely a matter of seconds. He steeled himself for the inevitable rise.

After a while he raised his hand and found that the water was only about his neck. Imagination! But when minutes passed and he found that the water had receded almost to his shoulders he was possessed by an overwhelming hope.

VASILIEV had regained the river.

With the rising of the mists he was able to keep to the main waterway. The land on both sides of the stream was flooded. The trees stood forlornly, rising from the gleaming water.

Vasiliev knew of the Chibouc Dam and he reasoned that the closing of the sluices must have caused this flood. He remembered having read of the project a long time ago. Many acres of bush country were to be sacrificed for the sake of the power this dam would develop.

He could see no available place to land so he decided to paddle toward the dam itself and there seek the shore. It would be quicker and he would find himself not far from the railway. Then to record the hill of gold as his own!

For nearly half an hour he paddled on down between the inundated banks of trees until at last, when he came round a bend, the vast reservoir lay before him. It was in a great bowl formed by the surrounding hills and the smooth water gleamed and shone in the morning sun.

The great dam was a white line at the far end of the lake it had formed. On the hillsides he could see white houses and toward the end of the dam were tents and shacks. Above rose the sweep of the green hills to the blue sky.

He turned the canoe toward the eastern shore and for a while he made good progress.

But at last he became aware that the bow of the canoe persisted in pulling away from him. He bent his back to the paddle but in spite of all his efforts he drew no closer to the distant shore and he saw instead that he was drifting down toward the dam.

He was puzzled. Unless the sluices were open there could be no such current. Perhaps it was just some vagary of the stream. All the same he became frightened and paddled desperately to get the canoe over toward the shore. It seemed to respond at first, but then the bow swung about at the first second he relaxed his efforts.

There was a current and it had the canoe firmly in its grip.

The white line of the dam drew closer. Then he saw that two of the great sluices were open.

There was a silver gleam where the smooth water poured over. The sun sparkled on it malevolently.

Vasiliev's whole soul was torn with fear. Sweat rolled down his face as he toiled to wrest the canoe from the clutching grasp of the terrible current. His breath came in sobs. And all the time the canoe was carried along at greater speed.

He saw men standing out on the dam, waving at him. He heard a dim and distant sound of shouting. The great smooth floor of water beneath him drew him irresistibly on toward the concrete wall, toward those dreadful gates where the water slid over with a sullen rumble.

Still he paddled. It was no use. His most violent efforts had not the slightest effect on the swift course of the canoe. The current was a force colossal and unconquerable and it hurled the frail canoe full toward the dam, directly toward the silver roll of water.

Vasiliev gave a great cry of despair. He saw a man in overalls standing above the open sluice, waving his arms. A rope writhed in the air. Vasiliev grabbed at it, missed, and then the canoe shot down the smooth cliff toward a boiling torrent from which rose a delicate white veil of drifting spray.

THE little boy had not been allowed to go with the rescuers who went to the cabin and found Keith, still alive, in the half-flooded cellar, but the old man asked for him as soon as he had been put to bed in the workmen's hospital at the dam.

"Come here, son," he said, weakly, as the lad entered the neat white room. "I want to shake hands with ye."

"Gosh, I'm glad they got you out in time, mister," said the boy, placing a grimy little paw in Keith's grasp. "I paddled and paddled and paddled and the canoe got stuck on a stump, and 'en I paddled again and near lost my way oncet and 'en," he took a deep breath, "'en when I got to shore I had to run over so far till I come to our house. So when I got there, pa he was goin' to lick me right away 'cause they couldn't find me no place, and 'en I told him about you so he said, 'Holy Moses!'—that's what he said, 'Holy Moses! The man'll be drowneded sure!' so he jumped over to the phone and he phoned to 'em down at the dam and he told 'em you was in the cellar and couldn't get out and if the water didn't stop comin' up you'd be drowned. And 'en they laughed at him, they did, and said he was crazy and you should 'a' heard pa cuss 'em out. He swore somepin' awful, by golly, right over the phone, mind you. Oh gosh but it was great—I wish I could cuss like pa can when he gets mad—and after a while they said all right they'd open the sluices but if he was lyin' to them about there bein' a man drowndin' in the cellar they'd send him to jail for fifty years. So then pa and that other man started out in the canoe and they brung you back."

"Thanks to you, lad. They tell me I'll be out of here in a day or so and then I'm goin' to buy ye all the candy ye can eat."

The youngster's eyes were still shining with excitement.

"But that other fellow—the one that shot at you. Did y' hear about *him*. When the sluices was opened he got caught in the current—"

"Yes, I heard about him."

There was something in the old man's tone that made the boy hesitate. He had prepared a graphic recital of the death of Vasiliev but he abandoned it now, reluctantly. He shuffled from one foot to the other.

"When do I get the candy?"

"Just as soon as I get out of here. Nurse says it'll be two or three days. I wa'n't bad hurt."

The lad scratched his head reflectively.

"If—if it's all the same to you, mister—I wonder if I could have a new knife instead. That's what I went back to the house for, remember—and I come away without it after all."

"Ye can have the best knife there is in town, and the candy too—and anythin' else ye can think of. And when ye grow up I'm goin' to ask your pa to let me put ye through college."

"Gosh, mister—you must be *rich!*"

"Oh, I'm not bad off," said old man Keith. He gazed toward the ceiling and smiled.

DO STORIES of the West ever lose their lure? People who know tell us Westerns are the most popular of all stories. Well, if you like them, we have a treat in store for you. Next month EVERYBODY'S *will publish the first of several stories by Charles Wesley Sanders. Its title is "Nome Means 'No Women'." Personally, we think Mr. Sanders's stories are racy, authentic and combine humor with intense excitement.*

The Conclusion of

E. Phillips Oppenheim's *Exciting* Novel

Harvey Garrard's CRIME

Preceding events briefly retold

HARVEY GARRARD is summoned to London, following the death of Mr. Armitage, senior partner in the firm of Garrard & Garrard, leather manufacturers, to find that unless obligations amounting to one hundred thousand pounds are met within forty-eight hours the firm faces bankruptcy. He appeals to his wife, Mildred, a beautiful selfish woman, for aid, but she refuses to put up either the house or her jewels. That night in the warehouse, facing bankruptcy, Harvey finds the body of Ebenezer B. Swayle, a wealthy American dealer in hides. In searching his brief-case he further discovered United States securities amounting to one million dollars. These he deposits in his private safe. Realizing that the securities would tide him over his financial crisis, he determines to appropriate them, vowing to restore them to the rightful heirs later on. Almost immediately, following the firm's financial readjustment, a wave of prosperity sweeps over the organization and Harvey begins to create a stir in the business world. In the meantime, Mildred has been accepting the attentions of Herbert Fardale, a wealthy, unscrupulous banker whom Harvey has already ordered from his house. Garrard's problems are further augmented by the appearance of Grace Swayle, the dead man's granddaughter, who has come to join him in London. She is amazed to discover that he died apparently penniless, and Harvey, feeling his guilt, offers her a position as private secretary until the missing property is found. Shortly afterward a business deal takes him to the United States, and Mildred, misinterpreting his trip for abscondence, sells the house in his absence and goes to Monte Carlo, accompanied by the ubiquitous Fardale. Harvey returns, tortured by the realization that Grace Swayle has intruded herself in his affections, to find that his wife has deserted him. He is tormented also by the fact that his deception concerning the missing bonds amounts to a penal crime. On the verge of confessing everything to Grace, who is eager to put the matter in the hands of Scotland Yard, he asks her to refrain for a week, at which time he hopes to restore the securities. Then, feeling the need of a holiday, he takes her with him to Ranelagh for a quiet afternoon under the trees. This holiday marks a distinct mental change in his relations with Grace and with it comes the realization of his deep love for her. The following day the bank refuses to return the bonds, which are no longer needed as collateral, because of an order from Scotland Yard to hold them. The Yard has traced one small bond known to have belonged to Swayle, and are awaiting report from America about the others before they prosecute Garrard. In the meantime Mildred has written Harvey and they are mutually agreed to have her start divorce proceedings. After escorting Grace to her apartment from a Bohemian dinner, where he has reluctantly admitted his love to her, he further confesses his guilt in taking the bonds from her dead grandfather. This she readily forgives and insists on his staying with her at her apartment. He steadfastly refuses, she flies into a rage, telephones Scotland Yard giving them the information that he has stolen the bonds. This fit of rage is followed at once by regret. An inspector from the Yard calls at Garrard's office the following morning accusing him of the theft, telling of the message from Miss Swayle, but admitting that she has quit her apartment hurriedly, leaving no address. Garrard admits nothing and the inspector leaves Garrard with the warning that he may expect a warrant for his arrest within a day or so and advising him to see his lawyer.

"I WILL," Harvey promised.

The inspector rose to his feet reluctantly.

"I am sorry I haven't been able to induce you to be more frank with me, sir," he said, as he prepared to take his leave. "But I hope you will appreciate the fact that we have done all that was possible to avoid unpleasantness. Our next move you have forced upon us."

"You are going to apply for a warrant, then?"

"I can see no possible alternative," was the grave reply.

"What for?" Harvey queried. "Stealing the bonds? How can they have been stolen when they are lying there in the custody of the Southern Bank? If the young lady would like them transferred to her name, that can easily be done."

"If it can, sir," the inspector observed, "it is a course which I should strongly recommend. At the same time I am bound to remind you of one thing which the amateur in misdemeanor seldom remembers. Restitution is excellent by way of securing a lenient sentence, but it does not wipe out a felony. Forgive my plain speech, sir. Good morning."

Somehow or other his little duel of words with the inspector had rather stimulated Harvey in the battle which he was determined to fight to the bitter end. His next step was one suggested by the inspector himself. He took down his hat, left word in the office that he would be back in a quarter of an hour and drove to the bank. Mr. Poulton received him promptly but anxiously. Harvey took possession of the easy chair, and proceeded at once with his business.

"Mr. Poulton," he began, "I understood you to say yesterday that you considered the account of Garrard & Garrard now as in an entirely satisfactory position, and that you no longer needed the bonds which you have been holding as security."

"That is perfectly true," the manager admitted. "At the same time, if you are going to ask us to part with the bonds, I can only repeat what Mr. McAlpine told you, that we have been instructed by the police not to release them for the moment."

"Precisely," Harvey agreed, "but now that they have served their purpose you can transfer them, I presume, to the account of the young lady to whom, as a matter of fact, they rightly belong."

"I—well, I'm not sure about that," Mr. Poulton remarked hesitatingly. "I don't think, though, that there should be any objection."

"I can't imagine the possibility of one," Harvey remarked. "Place them, if you please, on deposit in the name of Miss Grace Swayle."

The manager took up his pen.

"Is the young lady in England?" he inquired.

"She was in London yesterday in my office," Harvey answered. "She has left town for a day or two, early this morning, but I will ask her to call as soon as possible and see you. I should think she would probably like to sell a few thousand pounds' worth and open a current account."

MR. POULTON held his head for a moment. His client's tone was so casual that he was completely bewildered. He was sufficiently himself, however, to ask a leading question.

"Was it with Miss Swale's authority that these bonds were deposited as collateral security against your account, Mr. Garrard?"

Harvey, even in the thick of his battle, drew the line at a point-blank lie.

"There are family circumstances connected with this affair," he confided mysteriously, "which entail a certain amount of secrecy. Let us dismiss the subject for the present. You have heard that we are incorporating?"

"There is nothing else talked about in this part of the city," the manager declared. "Mr. Chalmer was in himself yesterday afternoon. I really feel, Mr. Garrard, apart from this other matter, which I frankly don't understand, that I should congratulate you upon the magnificent results achieved by your firm in an almost breathless period of time. Such a reward is entirely without parallel in the history of the trade."

"I am very much obliged," Harvey acknowledged graciously. "You know, they used to talk about Garrards' luck in the trade years ago. We have certainly had our share of it lately."

"Mr. Chalmer has promised me a supply of application forms," the manager continued. "I am afraid, however, that there will be very little chance of outsiders getting an allotment. We should like to be considered in the matter, if possible."

"I am afraid the general public haven't much chance," Harvey admitted, as he rose to his feet. "Still, if you want a few, Mr. Poulton, we will see what can be done."

He took his leave with a good humored little nod, and Mr. Poulton, despite himself, felt constrained to accompany his visitor respectfully to the main exit. An experience of forty years among the merchants of the vicinity left him helpless to understand in the slightest degree this most amazing client.

Harvey had never personally made himself more popular than he did that day among the buyers, the salesmen, and even the porters whom he encountered upon his leisurely progress through the warehouses on his return. He had a word or two for every one, and although he was guarded upon the matter his pronouncement with regard to the forthcoming floatation of the business was everywhere favorably received.

"Of course we can't promise shares for every one," he pointed out to a little group who had accosted him in one of the departments, "but so far as possible it is our wish to give those who have any business transactions with the firm the first chance and the general public must come in afterward. I instructed the accountants only yesterday to think out some scheme on these lines. The employees of the firm," he added, turning to an anxious-faced young salesman at his elbow, "will have the option of a few as a matter of course. Our buyers will have to follow afterward and the general public, if there are any left."

"Are the figures announced yet?" a manufacturer asked him, a little diffidently.

"Not officially. They will be large, of course, but they will be fully represented by tangible assets. We are not even considering the matter of good will."

Harvey made his escape at last and entered his office. His first eager glance was toward Grace's seat—still empty. He passed on to his desk, and looked through the little pile of letters and telegrams. There was nothing from her—no word or message of any sort. He sank into his chair. For a moment the spice of battle ceased to fire him. His militant spirit was subdued. The memory of those awful minutes came back to him with ominous clearness. He shuddered when he thought of what, in her hysterical state, she might have been capable. He remembered the almost vengeful gleam of passion in her eyes and an avalanche of hideous possibilities overwhelmed him. In that brief period of terrible doubt the peril of his position, the threatened loss of his name and liberty seemed as nothing beside the chill fear that he might have lost her forever.

PRESENTLY George Beckingham, whom he had summoned by telephone earlier in the morning, was announced. Harvey pulled himself together and motioned his friend to a seat.

"It is very good of you to come down here, George," he said. "You know how it is with me just now. I am working twelve or fourteen hours a day and that doesn't leave one much time to get up to Lincoln's Inn in office hours."

"My dear fellow," the other replied, "I am only too glad to come. Now tell me what's the trouble. I rather thought you were out of the woods financially."

"I am," Harvey acknowledged, "but I'm in the devil of a mess in another direction."

Beckingham was grave. He knew that when Harvey went so far as that the matter was serious indeed.

"Better tell me about it," he suggested.

"I'll tell you the whole story," Harvey promised. "Smoke if you want to and listen."

Harvey began a faithful recital of all that had happened from the moment when he had discovered Ebenezer Swayle's dead body in the waiting room until the previous night. He omitted only all mention of his relations with Grace. He spoke of their dispute which led to her ringing up the police as having arisen from some quite natural cause, and for the moment he did not touch upon her disappearance. Beckingham's face grew graver as he listened.

"What about the girl?" he inquired. "Is she vindictive?"

"I don't think she is," Harvey answered "She rang up Scotland Yard in a fury. She is a temperamental sort of person, and I think repented afterward. As a matter of fact she hasn't turned up here this morning. I expect she is keeping out of the way."

"It is important, of course," Beckingham said, "to have her on your side, but unfortunately the matter doesn't rest with her."

"You mean," Harvey persisted, "that supposing the police identify those bonds held by the Southern Bank as being the missing securities, they will prosecute me whether she appears in the matter or not."

"I should think it is almost a certainty," the lawyer admitted. "But here is an important point. Were you being in any way pressed by the bank at the time you deposited them?"

"Of course I was," Harvey acknowledged. "I shouldn't have taken a terrible risk like this unless I was fairly up against it. I was told, only the afternoon before, that I must either reduce my overdraft or find security for a large amount. Otherwise the bank declined to meet our engagements."

Beckingham gave vent to a little gesture of despair.

"There goes our last chance, Harvey," he groaned. "On the facts as they stand, the police are bound to prosecute and you are bound to be convicted. If you had simply deposited the bonds in the bank for safe keeping and made no use of them it would have been bad enough. Now that the police will be able to prove in evidence that you were being pressed it will be ten thousand times worse. I'm beastly sorry."

Harvey preserved an equanimity which, under the circumstances, was somewhat surprising.

"Well, I took my risk and I took it deliberately," he said, doggedly. "I tried to borrow money elsewhere and couldn't. If I hadn't used the bonds the firm of Garrard & Garrard would have gone into bankruptcy. As it is, I have saved the firm, and made the best part of a million of money. The bonds are there for whomever they belong to, no one will be a penny the worse, and although I hate what's going to happen like hell, George, I don't know that under the same circumstances I wouldn't do the same thing again."

Beckingham's legal mind showed itself in his disapproving frown.

"I wouldn't say that, Harvey."

"But I do say it, and I mean it," was the emphatic rejoinder. "Look at these fellows on the wall—father, grandfather, great-grandfather, half a dozen uncles and a few of the partners. Next to their religion this business was the most sacred thing in the world to them. They bartered honorably, they paid their debts honorably, they lived honorably and they made money for their successors. I'd have felt like a criminal, George, if I'd let the firm go down without taking a risk to save it. Personal disgrace doesn't matter so much. I'll face that. I suppose whatever they do to me I shall have a few years to live abroad later on."

"You'll have that all right," Beckingham agreed. "You may not get more than twelve months, but if it was only twelve days it's rotten all the same, isn't it?"

Harvey shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I know what you mean," he admitted. "I know that England and Paris and the Riviera are finished for me. I shall have to go a little further afield for my fun. I can do it, though. Others have done it before me."

"DOES your wife know about this?" Beckingham asked curiously. "I wonder whether it was one of her reasons for wanting the divorce?"

"Mildred is a very clever woman," Harvey confided. "Some instinct seems to have told her that there was trouble coming, only she thought that it was the firm that was going smash—not me. You know what she did when I was abroad—sold the house and the furniture, most of which belonged to me, pocketed the proceeds, got clear away abroad, and then wrote and asked what further provision I was going to make for her."

Mildred had never been a favorite of Beckingham's and his silence was expressive.

"Her suggestion of a divorce was, I must confess, rather a surprise to me," Harvey continued, "but I suppose it's all part of the game. She wants to get hold of another rich man while she's still attractive. She'll do it all right."

"I should think it highly probable," Beckingham remarked dryly. "She is still quite attractive enough. By the by, Harvey, I wish I could have a few words with Miss Swayle. I am sure she is much too charming to be in the least vindictive, but I should like to give her a little advice."

Harvey shook his head.

"I should like to see her myself," he confessed. "I'm afraid she's made up her mind to keep out of the way."

"A great deal depends upon her attitude, of course. You have no reason to believe that she would be anything but friendly now?"

"No reason at all," Harvey replied. "Our disagreement—the nature of it doesn't come into the case—is over. She wants to swear even that she gave me the bonds, but of course that doesn't help as she didn't arrive in England until after I had pledged them. By the by, George, what will happen if my divorce case comes on while I am in prison?"

"Time enough to consider that later on," Beckingham replied. "What we want to do now is to keep you out of prison."

"Tell me exactly what I am to do."

"All that you can do is to wait and see what action Scotland Yard takes. Directly they move, telephone me and I will fight them at every step, of course. We'll brief Pryde, and I shouldn't wonder if we could get you off with almost a nominal sentence—especially with the girl on our side. I'm afraid I can't hold you out any other hope. The police have wind of the matter and they are bound to go through with it. I'll do what I can, old chap, you know that."

Beckingham took his leave and Harvey went through the rest of the day in a sort of dream. About five o'clock he sent a messenger to Grace's flat. The boy came back with the note unopened. The young lady was not there nor had there been any message from her. Six o'clock arrived without further action from Scotland Yard. At seven Harvey telephoned for his car and drove himself to Chelsea. The porter of the flats, however, could tell him nothing. The young lady had left quite unexpectedly and he gathered from what she said that she did not expect to return. He had asked for her address but she had promised to send it on. A treasury note failed to elicit any further information, and Harvey's request to be allowed to go up to her rooms met with a polite but firm refusal. Reluctantly he abandoned his inquiries, drove to his flat in the Albany, had his bath, changed as usual and made his way to the club. Beckingham, seated with a friend at one of the smaller tables, called him over.

"Good man!" he exclaimed. "I was afraid I should have to dine alone, or with Dutton here who will talk shop all the time. By the by," he added meaningly, "that young lady of yours didn't go far after all."

"What do you mean?" Harvey asked quickly.

"Why, I looked in at the Milan Grill Room on my way here just now to see if I could find a client. She was there, dining with Philip Bartlett. I thought he seemed rather gone on her that day at Ranelagh."

There was a cocktail at Harvey's elbow and he drained it before he spoke. Then he crumpled up a piece of bread.

"You didn't speak to her?" he inquired.

Beckingham shook his head.

"I wished afterward that I had," he admitted. "We might have made sure of her address at any rate. However, they neither of them saw me, and I didn't want to butt in. You'd better join us in a bottle of wine, Harvey. You look fagged."

Harvey nodded acquiescence. For the moment speech was difficult. The ghost of that fear, more terrible than any other, had laid icy fingers upon his heart.

HARVEY drank a great deal more champagne for dinner that night than was his custom, drank liqueur brandies afterward, and, for a man of his reserved habits, talked at times almost boisterously. But the whole thing was a sham, a cloak to hide his overwhelming misery. More poignant by far than the fear of prison and disgrace was this new terror, this nameless fear, which for the first time threatened to unnerve him. The hysterical storm of anger which had driven her to the telephone to denounce him might so easily surge up again, might carry her hurt feelings blindly into the hell of the most natural, the most torturing revenge. His restlessness grew to fever. Bridge was an impossibility, further conversation beyond him. He sought the solitude of the reading room, and, finding it empty, walked up and down like a man distraught. His apprehension of the prisoner's dock had become as nothing. It was this new fear which was working like madness in his brain, blended as it was with tormenting memories of the night before. Beckingham, who presently invaded his solitude, spoke to him seriously.

"Look here, old chap," he expostulated, "it's no good giving way, you know. I can imagine how you feel, but the worst hasn't happened yet. You've stuck it wonderfully well till now, and you've got to carry on."

"Don't be afraid," Harvey replied bitterly. "This is just a side show, that's all. I tell you what it is, George, we are damned fools, every one of us who tries to live up to his standards."

"I shouldn't like to agree with you."

"Perhaps you are not a fool," was the

cynical retort. "I am worse than a fool. I'm a damned fool."

"If you expect me to understand you'll have to be a little more coherent," Beckingham reminded him.

"That's just what I'm not going to be," Harvey declared in a firmer tone. "Look here, George, you're being a good pal to me about this other business. I'm up against something else just now and there isn't any one in the world could help. Be off, there's a good fellow. You see, I'm calmer. I've made up my mind exactly what to do."

Beckingham knew his friend and departed, and Harvey like a man who makes his way to the scaffold, called a taxi and drove to Milan. He entered by the court entrance and walked slowly through the Grill Room. There were only a few diners left and Grace was not among them. Then he turned to the right and made his way through the lounge toward the inquiry office. He felt convinced that she was staying at the hotel—she would know nowhere else—but even wrought up though he was he wondered whether he should ever find courage enough to ask whether she were in. Suddenly he came to a standstill. The blood seemed to go singing through his veins and for a moment he was actually giddy. With three evening papers stretched out in front of her, Grace was seated at one of the small writing-tables. Before he could approach her or speak, she looked up and their eyes met. She held out her hands. What he saw in her face was like a glimpse of an undreamed-of heaven.

"Grace!" he faltered.

"You, Harvey!"

They both glanced around with the same idea. She led him to an empty divan.

"I meant to go back to Paris," she confided. "I packed up and left the flat for that purpose. Then as I was getting my ticket, I had another thought. You see, I was going so that they should not make me enter the witness box and confess that the bonds were mine. Then I remembered that they could prove that without me and that if I stayed here and swore everything which your lawyer told me to I might perhaps do some good. So I decided to stay. I did not go back to my rooms because I wanted to keep away from where the police could find me until after I had seen you. I have all the papers. Nothing has happened yet."

"Nothing," he assured her. "A police inspector has been to see me and asked some questions, and I have had an interview with my solicitor. We will talk about that later."

"How did you know I was here?" she asked.

"I dined at my club," he answered. "Beckingham told me—that you were dining here with Philip Bartlett."

SHE was quick of apprehension, and she suddenly realized from his drawn face, his unnatural voice, something of what he had been through. Her hand stole toward his and gripped it.

"Look at me, dear friend," she laughed. "Since this morning I have not changed my clothes. Do I look as though I had been dining with any one? What happened was that I had had no lunch and I saw through the windows that there were people in morning clothes in the Grill Room. I remembered our first supper, too, and I thought that I should like to sit at that table. I went in, found no one in our little corner, sat down and had some dinner. Just as I was finishing, Sir Philip Bartlett left the table where he and some men were dining and came over to talk for a few minutes. He asked if he might sit down and have some coffee. He left when his friends left—and—voilá! It is all."

For a moment Harvey was absolutely incapable of speech. There was a mist before his eyes. He forgot his environment. It was one of the supreme moments of weakness in his life. With its passing, helped by the gentle pressure of her fingers, he felt an amazing, a bewildering sense of relief. A great load seemed to have fallen away, and all the terrors of the last hour seemed like a page from a drama he might have been reading about some other man's life. He himself was immune. Nothing that happened to him could hurt. He had been spared the one great horror.

"You are very, very foolish," she whispered.

"I confess it," he answered humbly.

He suddenly was aware of the little throng of people by whom they were surrounded.

"Let us go somewhere," he suggested. "What about coming to my rooms?"

"There is nothing in the world I should love so well," she assented enthusiastically. "One can talk there. Here it is impossible.

I must have known you were coming, for see, I have my hat on. I am quite ready."

They left the hotel together and drove arm in arm in a taxicab to the Albany. She looked around approvingly when he had ushered her in to his sitting-room and installed her in a great easy chair.

"What luxury!" she exclaimed.

"That's right," he grumbled. "Thinking of yourself as a poor defrauded young woman, I suppose. Never mind, dear, tomorrow you can have all you want of luxury yourself. You are coming to work?"

"If I may."

"Then directly the bank opens," he confided, "I shall take you up there. Do you know that you are very rich?"

"Wonderful! How much money have I, please?" she asked ecstatically.

"Something like a million dollars," he answered. "In English money about twelve thousand pounds a year."

"You are horribly rich yourself, though," she murmured, with a little sigh. "Am I very selfish to be sorry?"

"Apparently I am not going to have much opportunity of spending my income," he reminded her, somehow or other feeling that the horror had gone out of the tragedy ahead. "Tomorrow morning at ten o'clock you are going with me to the bank. You must give them instructions to sell one or two of your bonds so as to provide yourself with some ready money. Then you can have a check-book and draw just what you like."

"It will be wonderful, of course," she confessed. "It is what I have longed for in a lesser degree all my life. Just now, however, I do not wish to think anything about it. There are other far more important things to be considered. How can I help you most? Had I better hide or can we think of some story together?"

He glanced at the clock.

"In five minutes," he announced, "I am going to put the position before you clearly. Until then—"

He took her into his arms. She drew a faint little sigh of content. All the passion and hysterical emotion of the previous night seemed to have passed away, to have subsided into a wave of wonderful tenderness. When at length their lips were parted they sat in silence for several moments. Then he began.

"I don't want to seem a pessimist, Grace," he said, "because nothing in the world could make me unhappy tonight, but it is much better for both of us that we face the truth. I am up against this thing and there seems no chance of any escape. I have had the best lawyer to advise me and this is his decision. The police by this time have all the necessary information and they are bound to prosecute. It doesn't make a particle of difference that you, the only injured person, don't wish it. The offense is one against the law, and not against a private individual."

"It seems very stupid," she declared. "Why cannot I go into the box and swear that I lent you the bonds?"

"You can't do that, dear," he pointed out, "because, alas, you were not in England at the time. You can't help me that way, any more than your ringing up the police last night did me any harm. I don't suppose they will trouble to see you again, except to ask you to identify the bonds, which, of course, you will have to do. What you can do to help, if you will, is to say that you were perfectly content to have me use them, that they have been restored to you intact and that if you had been here you would have passed them on to me to take care of in any case. That won't affect the main situation, but it will make things easier."

"You mean—"

"I mean that I will get a lighter sentence."

THE FULL horror of the things which she had scarcely realized broke over her.

"But Harvey," she cried, "do you mean that they will—that you will have to go to prison?"

"For a very short time, dear, I am afraid," he admitted. "I deserve it. I made a felonious use of the bonds and I did it deliberately. I didn't know about you. If I had I am not sure that it would have made any difference. I used them with the firm intention of returning them, as I am doing now, the moment the crisis was over. Unfortunately, half the thieves in the world have the same idea. Of course if things had gone the other way and the bonds had been sacrificed my position would have been worse even than it is now. As it is I am a thief theoretically and legally, but not actually. I'll have to suffer for it, but I have this consolation: I saved a business which has been established for a hundred and fifty years and I made a great fortune."

"What you say is almost selfish," Grace exclaimed indignantly. "How about me? Shall I not suffer, too?"

"That depends," he answered, "entirely upon yourself. My divorce proceedings have commenced and I shall probably be a free man long before I come out of prison. If you care for me well enough to wait, Grace—well—"

She threw herself suddenly into his arms.

"Of course I'll wait, dear," she sobbed, choking the remainder of his sentence back upon his lips. "But I don't want to lose you for even a day. Last night I was mad. You shall forgive me for that now that we just belong to one another. I will wait as long as is necessary. I will come to you when you want me. I am yours, entirely and for always."

"In that case," he declared, with a glad note of recklessness in his tone, "they can do what they like with me. As a matter of fact," he went on, "Beckingham thinks that they will do very little. I know very well that such a thing doesn't alter the law, but on the other hand the judge is always prejudiced by how a thing turns out. No one will be a penny the worse for anything I did, and many people are very much better off. Afterward we can go right away."

"There are heaps of lovely places to live in," Grace reflected contentedly, "although I shouldn't mind living in London or Paris or wherever you said. I should never feel that we had anything to be ashamed of, and as for other people—we have ourselves."

Their conversation merged into a pæan of expectation, of half-ecstatic, half-incoherent promises and confessions. It was the evening of which he had dreamed, the point of space when they seemed to have reached an absolute finality of understanding, to have taken their position definitely in each other's lives. Her new tenderness—a tenderness to which he was so pathetically unaccustomed—was enchanting. It brought out from him, too, a flow of sentiment and words of which he had scarcely believed himself capable. Their lightheartedness, under the circumstances, was almost incredible. She had suddenly become secure in his love—he had suddenly escaped from the torment of the most hideous thought that had ever found its way into his brain. At one o'clock they picnicked off chicken sandwiches and a half bottle of champagne which he found in the sideboard. Afterward he drove her back to the Milan.

"The one perfect evening of my life," he told her.

"The first of mine," she whispered, with her lips clinging to his.

THE following morning Harvey, whose car was blocked several times by traffic on its way citywards, arrived at the office nearly a quarter of an hour behind his usual time. Grace, who was already seated at her desk, engaged on the arrears of her yesterday's correspondence, looked up reproachfully.

"Really, my dear employer," she protested, "in these days of stress—"

He laughed, and leaning over, kissed her upturned lips.

"I don't care about any rules or regulations," he declared. "I may have to go short of kisses for so long that I am not going to neglect my opportunities."

"Go through your letters," she urged him. "We may as well get as much done as we can. I've cut all the envelopes."

"Come and sit by my side," he begged.

They read and sorted swiftly. Another batch, already opened, came up from below to be added to the pile.

"No sign of any break in prices," she remarked. "The order sheets, too, are wonderful. Do you intend to accept all these contracts?"

"Every one," he assured her. "We are piling up money, but we shall need it. Take down these cablegrams and telegrams, please. We had better have Greatorex up and Bale, from the skin department. After that it will be time to go to the bank."

She gave the necessary orders, and for another half an hour the three men consulted and Grace took note of their decisions.

"No signs of a break sir, yet," Greatorex remarked, with a faint smile.

"Who wants to break?" Harvey rejoined good-naturedly. "We still have plenty of stock and if you go through our offers of last week you will see where we should have been if we'd gone on buying indiscriminately—hung up with material we should never get rid of if there were the slightest drop. I'm off to the bank with Miss Swayle, Greatorex, now. Any one who calls can wait until I get back, if their business is important."

"I don't think they are ever coming," Grace whispered as they descended the stair case. "I think they have decided to leave you alone."

Mr. Poulton was in and eager to receive them. He accepted an introduction to Miss Swayle with obvious interest.

"This is the young lady," Harvey declared, "whose two hundred and fifty thousand pounds' worth of American bonds have been lying in my account. You have them transferred?"

"Yesterday afternoon, according to your instructions, Mr. Garrard. Miss Swayle has now on deposit the exact securities you left with us."

"You had better sell one of the bonds for ten thousand dollars and place the proceeds to the credit of a current account which Miss Swayle would like to open with you," Harvey directed. "After that the half-yearly interest will keep her going."

"The half-yearly interest," Mr. Poulton remarked a little dryly, "will amount to about six thousand pounds. Unless Miss Swayle is a very extravagant young lady I should think she will probably be able to subsist without realizing more securities."

Grace signed her name half a dozen times, accepted a check-book and various congratulations.

"There have been very few young ladies within my knowledge," Mr. Poulton declared, "who have found themselves unexpectedly in possession of such a sum of money. I trust that we may have the pleasure of acting as your bankers for a long time."

"There is no reason why I should withdraw my securities, Mr. Poulton," Grace replied. "I am so happy to think that they were of service to Mr. Garrard. I should have been perfectly content for him to have held them for a longer period, if he had desired."

Mr. Poulton coughed.

"I am very pleased to hear that," he admitted with perfect truth. "I hope that other people will hear from you to the same effect."

"They certainly will," she assured him, as they took their leave.

"The best of these bearer bonds," Harvey pointed out, on their way back, "is that they don't need any transferring or anything of that sort. They are just like English Treasury bonds. You either have them or you haven't them."

A MOMENTARY fit of depression seized her, an outcome of the strain from which they were unconsciously suffering.

"What am I going to do with twelve thousand a year while you are away from me, Harvey?" she asked.

"Do just the things you used to dream about and want to do," he urged. "Take some old lady from among your French friends who can play chaperon, go round Italy and find a place for our honeymoon. Italy rather appeals to me. The society life of the cities is very self-centered, and we shouldn't have to be explaining all the time why my hair is so short."

"If they dare to cut off your beautiful hair," she exclaimed, "I shall be furious."

"Do it good," he laughed. "Come along. Push after me. I can see the warehouse is full as usual."

There were a crowd of buyers and callers, brief interviews which had to be accorded, decisions to be given, but still no sign of the dreaded messengers. Only a short while ago, every contract or offer which was placed before Harvey at the merest fraction below the established price, he had refused, even though the profits were still adequate. Today he refused nothing. Even his own salesmen were surprised. He took two of them on one side before passing into his private office.

"Don't ask me why," he told them earnestly, "but today I am a seller. I know all about the cables from the skin centers and I know that there has been no break. Very possibly prices will go higher. Never mind. We've done well. Let some of the others have a turn. The policy of the firm today is: first, not to let a single person outside these walls know what that policy is, secondly, to buy nothing, thirdly, to sell everything which shows a profit."

"We are making the largest turnover now that has been known in the trade," one of the salesmen ventured.

"Let us make it," Harvey rejoined. "Better turnover than stock."

Back again to those breathless hours of work, with Grace always by his side, cool and competent. Soon the sounds of bustle throughout the great suites of warehouses died away. The business world, whatever its absorption, was faithful to its luncheon hour. Harvey glanced at his watch.

"In view," he suggested, "of our probable separation—"

"The Milan Grill," she begged.

"Come along then," he assented. "By Jove, I am tired! Four hours pretty strenuous work."

"I loved it," she declared.

"There's no telling how much time we mayn't have really," he remarked, as they entered the car. "I may be released on bail. I'm not, even in the eyes of the law, a desperate sinner. Of course, it's a situation which has its disadvantages," he went on thoughtfully. "We should have to give up the Milan Grill Room for instance. People would probably stand on their chairs to have a look at me. However, we shall be able to find a quiet place."

"We might camp out in the warehouse," she suggested.

"The situation suggests many features of interest," Harvey reflected. "One might write an article on 'How to live gracefully when out on bail.'"

"It's all very well to joke about it," she sighed, "but I'd much rather they left you alone. About that other matter, Harvey now, how long will it be before—"

"Decree about six months, from next February," he declared. "A devil of a long time, but if I'm taking a rest cure it won't matter, and if I'm free we'll spend most of it together. It's madam who has to be careful, although, by Jove, if any one could lure her into an indiscretion they'd be clever."

They sat over their luncheon until half-past three, and drove back to Bermondsey, both oppressed by a joint conviction that the thing which they had affected to treat lightly, but actually dreaded, was about to happen. Harvey knew it the moment he crossed the threshold of the warehouse. Greatorex, somewhat disturbed, followed him up the stairs and stopped him before he reached the office.

"There are some men waiting to see you from Scotland Yard, sir," he announced diffidently. "They wouldn't state their business. I thought it best to shut them up in your private room."

"Quite right," Harvey approved. "By the by, you still have authority to sign checks, haven't you?"

"I still have the authority, sir, but I have not exercised it since your return."

HARVEY passed on with a little nod and followed Grace into the office. The two men whom he found seated there rose to their feet as he entered. The one who appeared to be the superior saluted.

"Inspector Robinson, sir," he announced. "You will remember that I paid you a visit yesterday."

Harvey had thrown his hat on to a chair and made his way toward his table. He stood there looking at his visitors.

"I remember you quite well, Inspector," he admitted.

"I am sorry, to say, sir," the latter continued, "that as I warned you yesterday might be the case, I am here on unpleasant business. I have a warrant for your arrest."

"On precisely what charge?" Harvey inquired mechanically.

"On the charge of having stolen from the late Mr. Ebenezer Swayle Treasury bonds to the value of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds," was the grave reply. "It is my duty to warn you, Mr. Garrard, that anything you may say now is liable to be used against you in evidence."

"There is no harm that I speak, is there?" Grace demanded.

"None at all."

"Then let me tell you," she declared, "that Mr. Garrard never stole the bonds at all. They were mine as my grandfather's heiress and only relative, and I begged him to make use of them."

A faint smile flickered across the inspector's lips.

"It is not now a subject for discussion, madam," he announced, "but my information is that you had not arrived in London at the time of the alleged theft. Do you wish to give any instructions to your staff, Mr. Garrard, before we leave? We want to make everything as easy for you as possible. We can go up to the station in your own car if you will."

"I am much obliged for your consideration," Harvey said. "I should like to look through these letters here which have arrived during my absence, and to confer with my manager for a few minutes afterward, if you will allow me."

"By all means, sir," the inspector acquiesced.

Harvey seated himself in his accustomed chair. Before him, on the top of several other letters, was a long envelope, addressed to him and subscribed in the left-hand corner "Private and Very Urgent." He stared at it and turned it over. The flap was sealed with the stamp of the Southern Bank. He slit the envelope with the silver cutter which Grace had passed over and drew out a half sheet of the bank's note-paper on which were a few lines from the manager and a letter addressed to himself in unfamiliar handwriting and stamped at the back of the envelope "Savoy Hotel." He glanced through the former first.

> Dear Mr. Garrard: The enclosed letter was found in the middle of one of the sheaves of Treasury Bonds now being transferred to the credit of Miss Grace Swayle. I send it to you at once, hoping it may possibly be of service. Sincerely yours,
>
> James Poulton.

He read the few lines through twice to gain time. All the while his brain was working quickly. The letter which as yet he had not opened was without a doubt from Ebenezer Swayle. It was at least possible that its contents might justify his use of the bonds, The letter, however, was unopened. He realized the advisibility of swift action. He laid down the few lines from the bank manager, stretched out his hand for the enclosure and dropped it clumsily on to the carpet. He stooped down, the silver paper-knife still in his hand. When he stood up again he drew the letter from the envelope and read it through. He read it at first almost at a glance. He took in its amazing significance without an outward quiver. At that moment, however, he could not have read it aloud. There was a little sob strangled in his throat, his heart seemed to be pounding against his ribs. Presently he adjusted his seldom-used monocle, and read it through again word by word.

"Really," he exclaimed, at last, quite unaware that he was speaking in absolutely his usual tone, "this is an extraordinary coincidence. A letter which I have been unable to trace has been discovered by my bank manager in the middle of one of the sheaves of bonds. You will see what he says, Inspector."

He passed Mr. Poulton's letter to the inspector who read it through and returned it without comment.

"Now perhaps you will allow me to read out this communication from the late Mr. Ebenezer Swayle," Harvey suggested. "I will hand it to you afterward to do what you like with."

The inspector drew his chair a little nearer to the table and signified his approval. Harvey, who had only ventured upon one rapid glance at Grace, read:

> "Savoy Hotel
> Wednesday Evening
>
> My dear Mr. Harvey Garrard: I am writing to you in some uneasiness. In consequence of which and remembering the cordial business relations which have existed between our two houses for half a century, I am venturing to ask of you a great favor. I have brought over with me from the States a million dollars' worth of securities, practically my entire fortune, which it is my intention shall ultimately pass into the possession of my granddaughter Grace Swayle, my only surviving relative, who will join me in a few days from Paris. Yesterday, however, I was visited with what the doctor here had admitted to be a severe heart attack, and today I feel weak and ill. I am terrified at the thought that I might die quite suddenly with this large sum upon my person. I am paying you a visit at your warehouse this evening, therefore, to proffer the request that you will accept on deposit my securities, paying my granddaughter such interest as you think fair and either investing the money permanently in your business or in any other trustee securities that seem good to you. I hope that I do not ask too much, but I am sure that I need not remind you that your father was my oldest friend, and many acts of friendship have passed between us. I write this letter and shall leave it with the bonds in case I am not fortunate enough to find you in. Cordially yours,
>
> Ebenezer Swayle."

There was an unimaginable silence in the room for several moments after Harvey had finished reading, broken at last by a faint sob from Grace. Harvey, who had been looking steadily across at the great gilt-framed portrait opposite his desk, almost fancied that in that moment of somber tension he caught the glimmer not of a smile exactly, but of some relaxation of that stern, handsome face at which for days he had scarcely dared to glance.

"You see," he went on, looking up from the letter, and still speaking in his most matter-of-fact tone, although his voice seemed to him to belong to some other man and to be coming from a long way off, "the whole affair of these bonds is very ridiculous. I deposited them at my bank in my own name according to the late Mr. Swayle's written request. They were at Miss Swayle's disposal at any moment she required them."

"At any moment," Grace repeated, feverishly. "I much preferred Mr. Garrard to have the care of them, and I wish that no one had interfered. Now they are put to my account, and I am terrified at the thought of the responsibility."

The inspector stroked his chin thoughtfully. His keen eyes were fixed upon Grace.

"My information, madam," he remarked, "is that it was you who first gave the information to the police that the bonds were not forthcoming."

"That was before I had seen my grandfather's letter or had heard from Mr. Garrard," she explained.

"Then there was the telephone message," he continued, "which we received from you the night before last."

"Some one has been hoaxing you," Grace declared coolly. "I have never telephoned to Scotland Yard in my life."

THE inspector was momentarily nonplussed. Whatever his feelings may have been, however, he effectually concealed them.

"Will you allow me to read the two letters once more, sir?" he begged.

Harvey handed them over and the inspector read them through word by word.

"And now, sir," he continued, "might I be permitted to speak to headquarters on a telephone where I am not likely to be overheard?"

"There are three boxes just outside on your left," Harvey told him. "Take your choice."

The inspector left the room after a whispered word of instructions to his subordinate. Harvey opened a drawer, took out a box of cigarets and lit one. Grace, who had been leaning forward, her head buried in her hands, looked up and drew a little closer to him.

"Did you know about his letter," she asked, under her breath.

"Not an idea," he rejoined. "I only cut the envelope after I had dropped it."

"Will it help make any difference?"

He laughed confidently.

"We shall see in a moment," he replied.

In due course the inspector returned. He closed the door behind him carefully.

"Mr. Garrard," he announced, "I am very happy to inform you that I have received orders from headquarters not to serve the warrant in my possession. The Chief feels that in view of that letter from the late Mr. Ebenezer Swayle, no proceedings against you could possibly succeed. I am asked, however, to request you to come to headquarters with the letter, the young lady, and if possible the bank manager. The chief desires me to say that if you are able to satisfy him that the letter is genuine, it is most improbable that further proceedings will be taken."

Harvey rose to his feet.

"Then in that case," he suggested to Grace, "I think, perhaps, that we had better humor our friend the chief."

They left Scotland Yard about an hour later. A fresh wind was blowing up the river and the gulls were wheeling across the embankment. They were both a little silent, a little exhausted—but the world was theirs!

"God bless Grandfather Swayle for writing that letter," she exclaimed fervently. "And dear Mr. Poulton for finding it and sending it down."

"All the same," Harvey observed, with a humorous gleam in his eyes, "I am just as much a thief as I was."

"And I," she sighed happily, "have become a worse thing. I am a perjurer."

He shook his head.

"Your misdemeanor scarcely counts," he declared, "for I am quite sure that the inspector didn't believe a word you said."

"No more could any one believe that you were a thief," she retorted.

HERBERT FARDALE rose a little sulkily from his chair in the lounge of the Hotel de Paris and advanced toward the swing doors to meet Mildred. She was quite a brilliant vision in a morning gown of pale-green crêpe de Chine, but there was a distinctly absent smile upon her lips as she greeted him, her admirer.

"You are not going to say that I am late this morning," she protested. "Look at the clock. It is barely half past twelve."

"Well, that's a half an hour late," he complained. "You promised to be here at twelve o'clock."

"My memory again," she sighed. "Somehow or other I quite thought that it was half past. However, I told the car to wait. If you like we will go to the Royalty and have cocktails."

He picked up his hat and followed her.

"It isn't only the waiting about that's so tedious," he confided, as he took his place by her side in the automobile, "but what I can't imagine is why I am not allowed to come out with the car to the villa to fetch you. Do you realize, Mildred, that I have never set foot in the place since you went there—nearly twelve months ago?"

She looked at herself for a moment in a small pocket mirror, which she had drawn from the ormolu case by her side. On the whole she was satisfied. Her left eyebrow might perhaps be a little improved, but it was too delicate an operation to be attempted in the car. She replaced the mirror and sighed once more.

"Now, please, Herbert, don't commence the day by being unreasonable," she begged. "You ought to realize for my sake how necessary it is to be cautious. It is nearly six months now since my decree was granted and in three weeks or so I shall be absolutely free. Surely that is not too long to wait?"

He made no reply. He had his own ideas upon the subject but he was weary of exploiting them.

"You must remember," she went on, leaning forward to smile and wave her hand at a passing acquaintance, "that Harvey always hated the idea of a divorce and I should not be in the least surprised if he were having me watched over here so as to have the King's Proctor, or whoever that person is, intervene if I were indiscreet."

"I don't believe it for a moment," he declared, almost roughly. "Your husband isn't that sort at all."

She half closed her eyes.

"My dear man," she protested, "you really must get out of the habit of raising your voice when you speak. My nerves simply will not stand it. You may think that what I suggest is ridiculous but there have been several strange men about the villa lately who could give no satisfactory account of themselves."

"Have it your own way then," he acquiesced, with an attempt at good humor. "All the same you have other men there."

"I have my old friends," she admitted. "That is quite reasonable. Harvey would never object to that. You are the one person whom he might suspect and for that reason, however much I might want you to come, I have to keep you away. And now," she went on, drawing a newspaper from the rack, "I want to talk to you seriously. Tell me, is this true about Harvey?"

"Is what true?"

"Why, about Harvey and this wonderful floatation of his. Somebody has sent me this financial *Times*. I don't understand it very well, but is it true that the business of Garrard & Garrard was floated for two and a half million pounds and that they have just declared a first dividend of ten per cent.?"

"It is true enough," Fardale admitted, a little peevishly. "He must have had the devil's own luck. He raised the money somehow or other to square his bank, went in for a huge speculation, knowing nothing whatever about it, just at the right time and had the good fortune to stop buying just at the right time and just before the market weakened and got in again at the bottom. Then I suppose his bankers, or some one, suggested to him that it was a wonderful time to turn the business into a limited company, and he did it."

"This is all true then?" she persisted, tapping a column in the newspaper with her finger.

"Absolutely. The pound shares stand at twenty-nine shillings today, and even the six per cent. preference are at a premium."

She tore the paper into fragments. Her eyes flashed. Her thin mouth was suddenly crooked. Fardale, looking at her in astonishment, was amazed that for the moment she was an ugly woman.

"You know what this means?" she demanded. "It means that I have been cheated."

"I don't quite understand," he protested.

They had reached the little terraced café, and she led the way to a retired table, adjusted the umbrella to her liking and waited until he had given an order.

"I thought like every one else," she explained, leaning across the table, "that the business was going all to pieces and that Harvey would never have a penny. I knew he had a thousand a year which an aunt left him a long time ago, and directly he consented to my starting the action against him, I told my lawyer to try to get him to make over that thousand a year, so that I should be sure of something."

"Something," Fardale repeated, under his breath. "Why, my dear woman, you have over three thousand a year already."

"Don't be absurd," she scoffed. "Of what use is three thousand a year to me? I ought to have a very large alimony from Harvey after being generous and releasing him as I am doing, but I was so afraid that

I should get nothing that I insisted upon his giving up that thousand a year and I signed a paper pledging myself not to demand anything further."

HERBERT FARDALE sat quite still for a moment with his eyes fixed upon his companion. Then he suddenly and without ostensible reason began to laugh. He laughed until he was obliged to produce a silk and overperfumed handkerchief from his pocket and dab his forehead. The more he laughed the greater became her indignation.

"Will you tell me," she asked icily, "what you find humorous in the situation?"

Her tone checked his mirth. He wiped the tears from his eyes.

"My dear Mildred," he pointed out, "you must admit, although the joke is against you, that there is a certain amount of humor in the situation. You're a clever woman and I admire you for it. You sold the house and furniture when you saw trouble coming and cleared out. Quite right. You stuck to your marriage settlement naturally. Then, when you thought your husband was ruined you took what you imagined was all the money he had in the world—his thousand a year—so as to be sure of getting something. Clever again, no doubt, but if you had left him that little income your alimony would probably have come to at least five thousand a year."

"And you find that humorous!" she exclaimed furiously.

"Forgive me," he begged, genuinely alarmed. "I was stupid, of course. After all, you don't need to worry about money. You'll have all you want."

"All I want!" she repeated with scorn. "Never! Never in this world, Herbert—not even if you settled the whole of your forty thousand a year on me."

She sipped a cocktail and he studied her for a moment attentively. Without a doubt she was, as every one described her, one of the best dressed and best turned-out women in the world. Every detail of her toilette was perfect of its sort. How much of her complexion was natural and how much owing to art not even in this brilliant sunshine at a few feet distant could he tell. She was a very perfect and wonderful creation.

"Well," he said, "no good worrying about it, Mildred. You'll have me to draw upon before long."

"I wonder," she reflected, "whether the courts could not upset that arrangement."

"I shouldn't try if I were you," he replied a little shortly. "You see, an arranged divorce like yours is rather in the nature of a conspiracy. Harvey's lawyer, too, is far too shrewd a fellow to have left a loophole. You've got four thousand a year which no one can touch. The day we are married I'll settle another four thousand a year on you. That's a fairly good income for a woman who's going to live with her husband."

"Eight thousand a year," she murmured. "I suppose I shall get along on that."

He was a little startled.

"I should think you might try," he remarked, with unnoticed sarcasm.

"Everything is so expensive nowadays," she went on. "Tell me, what did you say your income was, Herbert?"

"About forty thousand a year," he replied. "It won't be long, though, if I neglect business rushing off to Biarritz or down here every month or so to catch a glimpse of you."

"But why do you?" she rejoined. "There is so short a time to wait now. Why don't you go back to London and work hard for a few weeks? I don't like to take you away from your business, Herbert."

"In other words," he observed, "you'd rather have me making money in the city for you to spend later on than dancing attendance on you here."

"Well," she pointed out, "there are a lot of people we both know whom we meet all the time, and of course they will talk."

"Talk," he repeated scornfully. "What the devil have they to talk about, I wonder? You've never passed beyond the lounge of the Hotel de Paris. You've never let me enter under the gates of your villa. When you lunch alone with me it is in a sense grudgingly and in the most public place you can think of. If we dine together now you are beginning to insist upon inviting some one else. You haven't been too generous with yourself this twelve months, have you, Mildred?"

"The women who are generous with themselves, out here," she answered calmly, "do not last long. I have promised to marry you and you have not long to wait. If I am careful it is for your sake as well as mine."

"There is such a thing as overdoing

carefulness," he complained. "Will you have another cocktail or shall we go to lunch?"

"I think that we will lunch now," she decided, gathering together her belongings. "Why, here's Pattie—Pattie Mallinson and Philip," she exclaimed suddenly, welcoming the newcomers. "My dear Pattie, do come and join us. How well you're looking. And Philip, too! I thought you never left England nowadays. I've just met Mr. Fardale here and he has brought me up to have a cocktail. You all know one another of course."

Fardale rose patiently to his feet. He was used to this sort of thing. The women if they had ever met before had generally forgotten the fact and the men were, as a rule, to say the least of it, casual. Chairs were brought by the attentive proprietor and the little party sat down. Besides Pattie Mallinson and Philip Bartlett, there were two other young people who had been playing tennis—Lady Sophie Troon and the Honorable Jack Mason.

"Every one must have a cocktail with me," Mildred insisted, generously. "My dear Pattie, I am so glad to see you. You can imagine what an anxious and terrible time I am having, although at your time of life you don't know much about these things. Mr. Fardale, you order the cocktails, please. You know which are the best ones. Tell me, Pattie, have you seen anything of Harvey lately? I am rather worried about him. I am told that he has been working much too hard and is looking very ill and thin. I do hope he's taking care of himself."

PATTIE was a young woman who seldom minced words. Apart from which she cordially disliked her cousin.

"I don't think you need worry about Harvey," she said. "He's got the most attractive flat in the Albany, we went there for tea the other day—and that pretty Lutyens cottage that every one admires so much down at Bourne End. I think he's doing himself quite well."

"I'm delighted," Mildred declared, in a tone which was meant to be one of relief but which lacked any expression of pleasure. "Poor fellow, I hope he isn't lonely. Sometimes my conscience quite troubles me. I feel that I ought to have been more lenient—to have overlooked just that one little slip. To do him justice Harvey never did care in the least for other women. I have never known him even to flirt before."

"Well, he's going pretty strong now, anyhow," Pattie observed. "I never saw him look so well, either."

"Indeed," Mildred observed incredulously.

"He's a lucky fellow," Pattie went on. "He has the most charming girl I ever saw in my life for a secretary—quite the dearest thing. She is half French and half American. Philip is crazy about her. I don't mind confessing that I was horribly jealous until I discovered that Harvey was the only man in the world she even cared to look at. She spent a week-end with us just before we came over."

"Really," Mildred exclaimed. "And Harvey, too?"

Pattie nodded.

"I don't think that either of them would come without the other. I don't know two people I envy more, to tell you the truth. She works with Harvey at the office three days a week, and the rest of the time they play golf or motor, or amuse themselves somehow or other. They are quite frank about it. They are going to be—"

"Oh!"

"Forgive me, Mildred, if you mind," Pattie went on, more cautiously. "I get chattering and I forget things sometimes. They are going to be married as soon as the decree is pronounced."

Mildred's face had grown very hard indeed.

"Are they?" she murmured. "And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime," Pattie said, "I think they are living a very delightful life—the sort of life two people of opposite sexes can lead if they are nice enough. They are seen together everywhere and yet no one has said a word against Grace. My mother adores her. We would have brought her out with us, only she didn't want to leave Harvey."

"Is she so wonderfully good looking?" Mildred inquired.

"She's one of the best-looking girls I know," Philip Bartlett pronounced, leaning over. "It isn't only that, though. She's such ripping good form. Her manner, the way she moves about and talks—"

"It's charm, that's what it is," Pattie broke in. "Poor Philip had his head turned in no time, and lots of the others, too, but they never had a chance. I didn't think Harvey had it in him to make such a success."

"She stuck to him, too, like a brick when he was hard up against it," Philip observed. "Every one looks upon Harvey as being one of the luckiest men on earth—and so he is now—but he had a pretty rough time when he first took hold of that business."

"THAT'S right," Fardale interrupted, eagerly seizing the opportunity to make himself heard. "I know because there's nothing goes on in the city with regard to money affairs that my firm don't hear about. For two days Harvey Garrard was trying his utmost to borrow money anywhere—came to me, in fact, but I didn't think the security good enough. One of my few mistakes, it seems," he added, with a hard little laugh.

"Is this young woman with whom you all seem so infatuated a secretary by profession?" Mildred asked.

"She was brought up in Paris with that idea," Pattie assented. "Her grandfather died lately and left her something like a million dollars, though. She goes on with her work simply because she loves it, and because it keeps her near Harvey."

"What a romance," Philip sighed. "She has an income of ten or twelve thousand a year and yet she insists upon going down to that smelly Bermondsey every morning and typing Harvey's letters."

"My husband—perhaps I should say, my late husband," Mildred observed acidly, "must have some attractions for the other sex, which he kept all to himself these years."

"I say again, and Pattie doesn't mind my saying it, that he's a damned lucky fellow," Bartlett pronounced. "Do you mind if I have another cocktail?"

"Every one have another," Mildred begged. "Mr. Fardale, you order them, and why don't you all come and lunch with me—you too, Mr. Fardale, of course."

Pattie accepted promptly.

"That's very nice of you, Mildred," she said. "None of us care about the food at our hotel, but we can't afford to lunch out too often because we are being done en pension. What do you say, Sophie, and the rest of you?"

There was a little chorus of assent. Mildred turned to Fardale with one of her sweetest smiles and begged very prettily.

"Do go and telephone for a table—shall we stay at the Hotel de Paris in a cool corner? That will be lovely. And perhaps you had better order the lunch if you will. Men are so much better than women at that sort of thing."

Mr. Fardale departed obediently. He was half furious, half gratified. He had been maneuvered out of his tête-à-tête luncheon with Mildred and he knew perfectly well that he would have to pay the bill for the guests whom she had invited. On the other hand he had just discovered that the flanneled youth and his sister were the nephew and daughter of a well-known peer and Philip Bartlett was of course a familiar figure in the world to which he aspired to belong. He decided to accept the situation good humoredly and while he was waiting for his number on the telephone, planned a little paragraph to send to the Mentone *News:* "At the Hotel de Paris, Mr. Fardale was entertaining, etc., etc.," at the same time he fully recognized Mildred's cleverness. Her almost bourgeois-like tribute to conventionality, her continual desire to avoid being seen with him alone in public places was building up a fire of resentment which some day or other he would cease to smother.

"Why do you let that fellow hang around all the time, Mildred?" Philip asked, during Fardale's temporary absence.

"He is rather atrocious, isn't he?" Pattie protested.

"My dear children," Mildred exclaimed, "can't you understand that just now I am obliged to be very careful? At the same time a woman can't be going about everywhere alone, and I choose some one for an occasional companion, therefore, concerning whom there could never be the least breath of scandal. No one would ever suspect me even of a flirtation with a person like that."

"I suppose you know best," Pattie observed doubtfully, "but he's a difficult type to get rid of sometimes."

"I am rather good at that sort of thing when it's necessary," Mildred declared.

"He looks good-natured," Lady Sophie, who was a kindly young soul, remarked.

"He has many excellent qualities," Mildred assured them all. "Here he comes. For heaven's sake don't let us look as though we had been talking about him. He is sometimes absurdly sensitive."

THEY all left the place together a few minutes later. Mildred attached herself to Philip Bartlett.

"Philip," she said, "I know that I can always trust to your judgment about business and things in the city. Is this success of Harvey's really established?"

"Absolutely and entirely," was the emphatic reply. "Harvey at the present moment is pretty well, if he is not altogether, a millionaire, and in a year or two's time he will be a great deal better off. It was rather a pity, Mildred, that you did not hang on a little longer," he added. "I suppose you imagined like the rest of us that Harvey was going down."

"I hope none of my friends will believe it was for that reason I felt that I had to act," she said coldly. "I am not one of those women who go about complaining, Philip, but Harvey has neglected me for many years. However, I know that you are his friend, so I will say no more."

Philip remained silent and the subject was not mentioned again during the very excellent luncheon over which Mildred presided and for which, as he had anticipated, Mr. Herbert Fardale had to pay.

The letter which Mildred wrote that afternoon took her some time and a great deal of thought. When it was finished she read it over to herself slowly, and with much satisfaction:

> MY DEAR HARVEY: I have been thinking a great deal about you lately and am very distressed to hear that you are looking so ill and have met with many business worries. I, myself, have found life alone wearisome in the extreme and I feel that I cannot face it for the rest of my days. I have come to the conclusion that I was a great deal too hasty in wishing for a final separation from you. I am writing to suggest, therefore, that we abandon these proceedings, that you come out here and stay with me for a week or two at the tiny villa I have purchased and that we commence life together again. I don't understand much about these horrid affairs, but I know that there are several courses either of us could take to prevent the "decree nisi" being pronounced, and I am writing to my lawyer at once to tell him of my decision, and if it is necessary to make some sacrifices in order to bring the affair to an end, why, I shall certainly do so.
>
> I hope, dear Harvey, that this letter will give you as much pleasure to receive as it has given me to write. I hear no reliable news of you but I sincerely trust that you do not allow yourself to be too greatly worried by business and that in other respects all goes well. Your affectionate wife,
>
> MILDRED.

Mildred sealed and despatched her letter, and for the rest of the afternoon was almost light-hearted. She permitted herself a longer automobile drive than usual with Fardale and finding themselves at Cannes after a successful hour or so at *chemin de fer* with her companion's capital, she even surpassed herself in graciousness.

"If you like, Herbert," she suggested, glancing at her watch and finding that it was eight o'clock, "we will stay and have dinner here somewhere quietly and go back and change afterward. What do you say to that?"

"I'm all for it, of course," he assented with alacrity.

"It will make up to you," she continued, "for the luncheon. I was so sorry to land you with all those people, but you know I can't be too careful and Pattie is such a little cat. I don't believe a word of what she was saying about Harvey."

"That chap, Sir Philip, seemed to back her up," Fardale observed.

"I am convinced that they have invented it between them," Mildred insisted. "Pattie hates me and adores Harvey. She'd have given anything to have married him herself. However, that's old history. Where shall we dine? We must remember that we haven't changed."

"We could get a private dining-room at the Carlton," he proposed.

Mildred was in a marvelously gracious mood. She tapped him on the arms and smiled almost coquettishly into his face:

"A most improper suggestion," she pronounced. "You know we can't do that, Herbert, however pleasant it would be. We'll go to that little place just opposite."

A great many people had looked at Mildred admiringly that afternoon, and Fardale felt a sudden increase of his infatuation. They had drifted into the bar for a cocktail and he ventured to raise her fingers to his lips.

"Wherever you say, so long as we are together," he acquiesced gallantly. "But time moves slowly."

THE next few days marked a period of some anxiety for Mildred, who had come to certain conclusions with regard to the possible trend of events. If Pattie's story were true and Harvey were really infatuated with this young woman, she decided that he would probably come out or send his lawyer immediately on receipt of her letter, offer to destroy that iniquitous agreement and allow her an alimony of at least five thousand a year if she promised not to interfere with the course of events. On the other hand, if Pattie had been romancing out of sheer perversity there was just a chance that he might accept her suggestion. She knew, although she seldom sympathized with it, Harvey's almost exaggerated sense of honor in the larger issue of life. An appeal such as she had made to him, if he believed in its genuineness—and he was the sort of man who was easily deceived—would be almost irresistible, provided he was free from any other serious entanglement. She found herself suddenly hoping that such might be the case. He was at least easy to live with—even from the most negative point of view, companionship with him would be far more agreeable than with any other man of her acquaintance. The idea of marrying Herbert Fardale had previously presented itself in only connection with his forty thousand a year. The personal side of it, as the time drew near, began to trouble her fastidiousness. They would have separate suites of course. She would see as little of him as possible when once the settlements were signed, but even the limited amount of familiarity upon which he would probably insist was in a measure distasteful to her. Her attitude during these days toward her waiting suitor was, without doubt, trying. She more than ever insisted upon a rigorous observance of the *convenances*. She excused herself from lunching alone with him twice within a few days, going once to the house of a French duchess, where Fardale was not even allowed to call for her, and at another time to a party to which he was not invited and her presence at which, therefore, he was inclined to resent.

"But my dear man," she pointed out, a little irritably, "none of these people know that I am thinking of marrying you. Why should they ask you? Naturally, afterward they will ask us together, but you must wait until our engagement is announced for that."

"I don't want to seem unreasonable," he assured her, "but for heaven's sake, Mildred, don't carry this aloofness too far. It's getting worse with you. I haven't had even the iciest little kiss for more than a week. There are limits to this stand-off sort of business, you know."

She patted his hand. Even her fingers seemed to him very cold.

"My dear man," she reminded him, "the limit is about three weeks."

Then came the morning when the long-waited-for telegram arrived. She sat up in bed and opened it, and read it word for word while her maid deftly arranged the coffee equipage by the side of the bed. It was handed in at London on the previous day:

> I have recived your amazing letter and refrain from any comment under the circumstances. Owing to extra judge having been appointed our case was reached some time before expected and the "decree nisi" was pronounced yesterday. I wish you every happiness. I myself was married this morning.
>
> HARVEY.

The telegram fluttered from her fingers and she sat quite still for several moments. Then she sank back once more among the pillows. Her fingers, on either side, clutched at the fine sheets as though anxious to tear them into shreds. Her face was dark with anger—free from the skilful treatment of her masseuse and maid, it was almost ugly. She had laid her plans so carefully, relying upon the advice of her lawyers as to the exact date upon which the decree was liable to be pronounced. This was a contretemps which she had never even contemplated, a disaster which had wrecked her schemes. Gone now were all her dreams of great wealth, with an indifferent but personable and extravagant husband; gone, too, which was almost more galling, her chance of a big alimony. There was nothing left between her and what she termed "poverty" but the pompous and suddenly distasteful figure of Mr. Herbert Fardale. For a moment she shrank from the idea with genuine repulsion. Then she remembered the limitations of the modest little villa she was living in, her slim retinue of servants, her single chauffeur and small car, those Paris bills, most of them unpaid. Forty thousand a year! Could any man with such an income be really unattractive? Even if he remained firm about that four thousand she would still be able to wheedle presents out of him and he would certainly be liable for her bills. She sighed, drank her coffee, and looked at the gowns hanging on her wardrobe, which her maid presently displayed.

"Something in blue," she decided, remembering her suitor's preference. "And Annette."

"Madame?"

"This morning I must be punctual. I am meeting Mr. Fardale at the Hotel de Paris at half past twelve. Prepare my bath an hour earlier. I should like to leave at midday."

"Certainly, madame," the woman murmured.

MILDRED sipped her coffee, nibbled delicately at a roll and dozed for an hour. Then she awoke sufficiently to lend herself to the ministrations of a masseuse and afterward arose, took her bath, and made a long and intricate toilette. At precisely the appointed hour she entered the lounge of the Hotel de Paris and greeted her admirer with a smile, half pensive, half of subdued satisfaction. She had made up her mind that she was going to be very sweet to him.

"Herbert," she said, as she gave him her fingers, "come and sit with me upon the lounge. I have some news for you."

"News?" he repeated.

"The 'decree.' They reached the case three weeks before they expected. It was pronounced yesterday. I am a free woman."

"God bless my soul," Mr. Fardale exclaimed.

She smiled tolerantly.

"Well," she said, "that sounds a little profane, but of course it is a surprise. I am glad for your sake. You have been very patient, dear, and I am very grateful to you for it."

"You are a free woman," he repeated still dazed. "Your own mistress."

"Entirely," she assented. "We can be married as soon as everything is in order."

"Look here," he suggested, "Paris is the quickest place. We can catch the Blue Train this afternoon and be married at the Embassy tomorrow. Then we can either come back here or to Biarritz—whichever you prefer."

She smiled indulgently.

"But my dear Herbert," she protested, "there are business affairs to be arranged first."

"Business affairs?"

"The settlements," she murmured.

"We don't need to wait for that," he declared irritably. "You can trust me, can't you? If I say I will settle four thousand a year on you, I'll do it, but as for waiting, I'm sick of it. Mildred, don't be hard on a fellow. I've been damned patient."

"Hush," she begged.

"Well, it's enough to make any one use language," he grumbled. "No delays, if you please. Tell your maid to pack up a dressing-case. I have clothes in Paris for myself. We must catch that train."

She laid her fingers upon his coat sleeve.

"Herbert," she begged, "please do not be so impetuous. I want to talk to you about money. You won't mind?"

"I won't mind hearing what you have to say," he admitted, "but be quick, please."

"You have forty thousand a year," she pointed out. "Do you think, bearing that in mind, that four thousand a year is enough to settle on any one like me? You see, dear," she went on. "I know what a clever and successful business man you are, and, although it isn't easy, I'll try and talk in a businesslike way. You want to know nice people and you haven't too many opportunities of meeting them. I can introduce you into society and to every one you want to know. I can entertain for you on any sort of scale you choose, and, you don't mind my saying so, do you dear, with me you will live in an entirely different atmosphere. Now this is worth something, isn't it? Herbert? Are you listening?"

"Yes, I am listening," he acknowledged. "I am interested. Go on."

"Well, there isn't much more to be said. I think that out of forty thousand a year you might easily allow me eight. If you do that I promise you that you shall have the smartest people in London at your house and that you shall have with you always the best-gowned and best-turned-out woman in London or Paris or here—wherever we are."

"That's a good deal to promise," he observed. "You come into competition with the *cocottes*, you know."

"There is no necessity for you to be coarse," she remarked with a little shiver.

"I can't see that the truth is ever coarse," he rejoined. "Well, leaving the question of the amount I settle upon you outside of consideration for the moment," he went on, "what I want to know is this, are you prepared to marry me in Paris tomorrow?"

"You stupid man," she exclaimed. "You ought to know that lawyers can't be hurried like that. I will marry you on the day the settlements are signed."

"I see," he muttered. "I have waited for a year now, you know, Mildred. It's hard lines on a man this hanging about all the time, and you've been difficult, have you not? Very stand-off and that sort of thing."

"But aren't you glad now that the time is coming when all that won't be necessary?" she demanded.

"Those settlements," he pointed out, "they take at least a fortnight to prepare. Do you want to wait all that time?"

"How can we help it?" she asked. "We will go to Paris if you really want to this afternoon, and if you like we will go by the same train. Then you can get the lawyers to work. You can stay at a hotel quite close to mine and in a fortnight or three weeks, when everything is settled, we can be married and you can take me down to Biarritz in your Rolls-Royce. Annette and your servant can come down in my little car. There will be quite a gay crowd there and we shall be just in time for the season."

"I want to be married tomorrow," he declared doggedly.

"That," she said, with a shade of coldness in her tone, "is quite out of the question. Please go and have your servant pack a bag. I will take the car back to the villa and return here in an hour or an hour and a half."

He rose to his feet.

"Very well," he acquiesced.

HE ESCORTED her to the door, handed her into the automobile and returned to his rooms slowly. He gave his servant instructions to prepare for a journey, seated himself at the writing-table and scribbled a note, and afterward descended to the restaurant where he enjoyed an excellent luncheon. When Mildred returned in about two hours, wearing a very perfect traveling costume of light brown and followed by her maid, the concierge at the door handed her a note. She recognized Fardale's writing and tore the envelope quickly open:

> MY DEAR MILDRED: You have worn out my patience. I have studied you day by day, especially during these last few weeks, and I have come to the conclusion that you are the most selfish woman who ever lived, that you haven't a scrap of feeling or consideration for any one except yourself, and that you are also as avaricious in your way as any little city Jew I ever did business with. I have been fond of you, and the slightest sign of generosity on your part would have kept my affection. Sometimes a word would have done it, certainly a pressure of the arm, a kiss, an embrace, any little evidence of an affection for which I have sought in vain. You have starved me, and to put it my own way—which is vulgarly—I've had enough. Good-by. I have caught the three-thirty and shall have left the hotel before you get back. HERBERT FARDALE.

Mildred's fingers closed over the letter. Then she suddenly remembered that the lounge was full of people and with a brief order to her maid she began to make her way past the tables. Pattie Mallinson waved her hand.

"Come and have coffee with me, Mildred," she invited.

Mildred smiled at her sweetly.

"My dear, I'd love to," she assented. "I'm just going in to powder my nose. I'll be right back directly. I'm really quite upset," she continued, in an undertone. "My 'decree' was made absolute the day before yesterday and I have had such trouble with that terrible person Mr. Fardale. I have tried to keep friendly with him for Harvey's sake, but I've had to send him off at last. I'll be back in two minutes, Pattie. You people must really be very nice to me. I feel unaccountably lonely."

They watched her gracefully complete her perambulation of the lounge and disappear. Then Pattie and Philip Batlett exchanged glances.

"I'll lay a fiver," the latter declared, "that that chap Fardale has turned her down."

HARVEY, as he shook hands with the last of his fellow directors and entered his private office, had something of the air of a conqueror. He closed the door behind him and, glad to be alone, sank into his accustomed chair and permitted himself a few minutes' tranquillity. He had come straight from the crowded Board Room wherein had been held the second annual meeting of the firm of Garrard & Garrard, Limited, and it seemed to him, fanciful once more in that room of memories, that the congratulations which had been showered upon him found a silent echo from that little gallery of the pictured past. Fearlessly enough now he leaned back and faced them all. There was happiness enough in the world for him outside this gloomy yet dignified apartment, but within it there was a deep and unique spirit of thankfulness. He had accepted their trust and he had not failed them. It was not merely a commercial success in which he gloried. The living had been ready enough to crowd round him, to praise and congratulate him. He had kept his word with them, but what in those few moments seemed of far deeper significance to him—he had kept his word with the dead. There was a knock at the door. Pattie Mallinson's father, one of his fellow directors, entered.

"Can I take you home, Harvey?" he asked. "You remember that you and Grace are dining with us down at Ranelagh."

"Of course I do," Harvey replied. "If you can drop me in Hill Street I'll be glad. I only want to shake hands with Greatorex."

THEY left the place together after Harvey had spent a moment or two in the counting-house exchanging mutual congratulations with Greatorex and a few of the senior clerks. They entered Lord Mallinson's car and drove off. The latter was a little thoughtful.

"Tell me, Harvey," he asked, "how old are you?"

"Forty," was the light-hearted reply. "I don't care. I feel years younger than I used to."

"Considering that you are one of the most successful business men in London and that your wife is the most charming woman I know, I should think you ought to," Mallinson declared. "I can understand your wearing so well, but there is one thing I must confess that puzzles me."

"I'm no solver of conundrums," Harvey confessed, "but if I can help—"

"Well, tell me this, then, what on earth turned you into a matter of a month or so from a first-class half-back at polo, a scratch player at golf, a very fair performer at tennis, but certainly nothing else, into one of the giants of commerce?"

"There isn't any answer," Harvey confided. "It sounds incredible but the explanation, such as it is, is simple enough. When I was sent for to come back from the Riviera two years ago, I found myself faced with an impossible situation. The business had been going to the dogs for years, it was hung up with overvalued stock, a lot of doubtful debts and barely enough even on paper to pay twenty shillings on the pound."

"That's what I've always understood," Lord Mallinson remarked. "And how on earth did it come about that you—an utter ignoramus commercially—could deal with such a situation?"

"I speculated," Harvey replied curtly. "I got the idea of writing the whole of the stock down to market value and buying heavily at the then existing prices to level up. From all the trade journals I could read it seemed to me that prices were more likely to go up than down, and I went in fact for a gigantic flutter to escape an ordinary commonplace bankruptcy. This is the way I looked at it, Mallinson." Harvey went on, after he had paused to light a cigaret. "If the firm of Garrard went into bankruptcy in an ordinary fashion the shades of my father, grandfather, and all the rest of them, would stir in their graves, but if it went to headlong destruction, chucked there by a young fool who knew nothing of what he was doing, it seemed to me perhaps that such a disaster would reflect a little less upon the name of the House. So I went for it and I had the devil's own luck. The boom came just when I hoped that it might and the fall in prices only began when we were almost cleared out of stock. Our profits were fabulous. I incorporated quickly, gave generous terms, and since then we have never looked back."

"Looked back?" Mallinson repeated. "Twelve per cent. I've got this year, Harvey, and then you've placed a ridiculously large sum to a reserve. Before you let me have those shares, I was making only about four and a half per cent. I'm a rich man now to what I've been."

Harvey laughed.

"Every one's prosperous who has had anything to do with the firm," he said. "We've finished with speculation, though. We have the name today of being the soundest house in the business and we're going to keep it. I am training up Greatorex's youngster to succeed me, and in five years' time Grace and I are going round the world. I don't think they'll want me any longer then, and I shall settle down in the country with a flat in town and a villa somewhere on the Riviera."

"A wonderful program," Mallinson declared. "You've never thought of Parliament, I suppose, Harvey?"

"I'm too busy being happy. I haven't any time to give away from my daily life.

Selfish, perhaps, but, although I may have seemed to be enjoying life, I had a pretty rotten time for ten years."

"Ever hear of Mildred?"

"Very seldom. I think that she scarcely leaves the Riviera. I expect it's the gambling. Sometimes she spends a month or two at Deauville. I don't think she's been back here at all. By the by, when are Pattie and Philip going to be married?"

"In two months' time. This is really by way of being their engagement dinner tonight, absolutely informal, they didn't invite any one until this afternoon, but the duke's coming and the rest of the family, so we thought they might as well know about it. Tell you what, Harvey, why shouldn't I drive you down? I'm going alone. Grace is here already with the rest of them, isn't she? I'll call for you in half an hour's time."

"I'd be glad," Harvey assented. "I told Grace not to send the car back."

"In half an hour sharp," Lord Mallinson enjoined, glancing at his watch.

THEY all met on the lawn outside the Winter Garden and Grace at once drew her husband on one side to hear the latest news from home. Afterward they drank cocktails and made their leisurely way into the beautiful dining-room. Again as they passed along the terrace Grace dropped a little behind to whisper to her husband.

"I'm always just as foolish whenever we dine here," she confided. "I remember the first time."

He pressed her fingers. Their host intervened good-humoredly.

"For Heaven's sake, keep these young people apart when you seat them, Pattie," he begged. "Their effect upon an elderly widower like myself is pernicious. Remember if I marry, your settlements may have to suffer."

"Don't you worry, dad," Pattie replied. "They're only like this because they have not gotten over the novelty of that ridiculous infant."

Grace looked at her friend significantly.

"You wait," she murmured.

It was a dinner between cordial, even intimate friends. The long-expected announcement was duly made. Every one was gay and congratulatory. It was not until the stars had found their way into the deep indigo sky and the red-coated band were putting their instruments away that the party broke up.

"Now I've done it," Harvey confessed, as they drove down the avenue, and in the solitude of the limousine Grace's arm crept through his. "You know where they are going for their honeymoon—Italy and then home by Monte Carlo. I promised we'd meet them for Christmas in Monte Carlo."

"Then we shall have to take Philip to see his godfather," Grace declared firmly. "We can't go without him."

Harvey leaned back in his place and laughed.

"Why not?" he exclaimed. "I don't know that I've ever seen a baby on the Terrace at Monte Carlo, but we'll set a new fashion."

"You dear," Grace murmured, "it will be heavenly."

GRACE had her way and in due course the loungers between half past eleven and half past twelve on the Terrace at Monte Carlo, some months later, were provided with a new sensation. Every morning during Christmas week young Master Philip Garrard, escorted by two nurses and accompanied, most of the time, by Grace and Harvey, took the air on one of the most beautiful, yet perhaps the most pagan, promenade in the world. The old Duchess Zithier, who had been a friend of Harvey's mother, stopped them to examine the novelty for herself.

"My dears," she exclaimed, as she dropped her lorgnette, "why shouldn't you go in for freaks if it pleases you? There's Madame de Courteley brings a chimpanzee with a gold chain every morning, there's that little French actress with her llama, and that shockingly behaved niece of mine drags six ridiculous little Pomeranians after her from one end of the Terrace to the other. Yours is certainly the most original contribution to the show. Bring it to lunch one day next week, Tuesday, if you like, at half past twelve."

"Still at the villa, Duchess?" Harvey asked.

"Still at the Villa. I'd like to show your wife the gardens."

"We will come without our curio, if we may," Grace suggested. "He is only good-tempered upon the surface."

"Then leave him at home by all means," the Duchess begged. "Don't forget—Tuesday."

Presently Pattie and Philip joined them and stood talking for a moment before they continued their promenade together. As they neared the bend, Grace touched her husband upon the arm.

"Harvey," she asked, "who is the tall, fair woman coming? You must know her, I think, by the way she is looking at us."

Harvey, more or less prepared for such an encounter, was unperturbed.

"The lady who was once my wife," he answered.

Grace was for the moment curiously agitated. Mildred, advancing in leisurely fashion, followed by a maid with a Pomeranian upon a little chain, smiled generously at them all.

"My dear Pattie," she exclaimed, "congratulations, to you both! I was so sorry I could not come to the wedding. And Harvey—I have never seen you looking so well. I shall not ask to be introduced to your wife because it might be rather embarrassing but I will take it for granted that we are acquainted. Is this prodigy really yours, Harvey?"

She moved her head toward the perambulator. Harvey nodded.

"Jolly little chap, isn't he?" he observed.

Mildred did not speak for a moment. She was looking intently into the chubby face and the wide-open eyes. Then she turned away.

"Well," she said, "we shall not meet again, of course. Pattie, you'll come and see me, won't you, and bring Philip. Mine is the third villa on the left before you reach Beaulieu—Villa des Mimosas. Au revoir."

She passed on, but Harvey noticed the tightening of the lips, the little streaks of pallor underneath her delicately applied color.

"By Jove, that's a plucky woman," Philip declared.

The others said nothing. . . .

"Tonight," Grace declared, in the Sporting Club shortly before midnight, "I feel like dancing."

"So do I," Pattie declared. "Let's all go to the Carlton."

"I'm ready," Harvey assented promptly. "I've won a few *milles* and they'll have it back from me if I stop here."

Philip, only, hesitated. He drew his wife on one side and whispered in her ear. She made a little grimace, apparently only half impressed. Grace turned toward him severely.

"Philip," she remonstrated, "you're not to say 'no.' We are all so anxious to dance. Sophie and Jack want to come, too. Please do not be horrid."

"My dear," Philip Bartlett replied, "I'm just as anxious to dance as any of you. There was just one reason which made me hesitate, and after all I don't think it's worth considering. I'm for going all right. Come along."

On the way out Philip found himself alone with Grace and explained his apparent reluctance.

"You must remember," he confided, "that Monte Carlo is a veritable hotbed of gossip, one never knows what to believe—but I have heard one or two rather strange stories about Mildred."

"Do not tell them to me, please," Grace begged.

"I won't," he assented with relief, "but on the other hand they say she's always at the Carlton and I fancy that Harvey might shy—not that it has anything to do with him."

"She doesn't look the sort of woman to get herself talked about, even in Monte Carlo," Grace observed. "She seemed to me to have what you call poise—to be so admirably self-centered."

"So we all thought," Philip agreed dryly.

THEY crowded into the Carlton, gayest of supper places, a few minutes later. Every one started dancing at once, and it was not until half an hour later, when they were discussing the menu, that they noticed Mildred, seated on the other side of the room, alone with a short, dark man.

"Mildred's tête-à-tête," Pattie exclaimed, a little surprised. "Our model of conventionality, too. I wonder who the young man is."

"The young man," Philip confided, studying the menu intently, "is one of the professional dancers here."

There was a brief silence. Then every one began to talk at once. Grace sprang up and leaned upon her husband's arm.

"Please dance with me, Harvey," she proposed. "It will be some time before they bring us anything."

The lights were half extinguished as the orchestra played the melody of the moment, but as they passed Mildred's table, Harvey noticed that her fingers were tightly clenched together. She looked up, however, and nodded, as they went by, and presently when they had commenced their supper, she lingered at their table on her way out of the room.

"I came with some Russians—friends of the Grand Duke," she explained, "but the tiresome people had to get back to Cannes and left me all alone. If any of you want to try one of the professional dancers, do have a turn with my protégé, José Montarey. He's quite the most wonderful performer."

"We're even numbers, fortunately," Philip pointed out.

Mildred passed on with a valedictory smile, but was back again, in her place within half an hour. She was still there when at three o'clock they were preparing to leave. A young Frenchman who had been one of Bartlett's associates in Paris, came over to their table, was introduced and accepted a chair. He confessed himself a *habitué*.

"I come here every night," he confided. "There is nowhere so amusing, no place where the people are so extraordinary. By the by, there is a countrywoman of yours over there—Mrs. Garrard, I think her name is—with the professional dancer."

Philip dropped his heel on the floor but missed his friend's foot. Harvey's face became stony.

"The lady of whom I speak," the young Frenchman went on equably, "is a curious example of the influence of this place. She is a woman whom every one knew, well-placed in English society, plenty of money, always strict so far as regards her behavior, never the subject of gossip at any time. They say that she even divorced her husband on account of a peccadillo, yet she comes here one night with some friends some months ago, and takes one of those outrageous fancies for that young man. It is an extraordinary thing," he went on, so interested himself that when he felt Philip's hand upon his arm he only moved a little farther away, "the influence some of these southern professional dancers have upon the most unlikely women. This Mrs. Garrard, for instance, has been here every night for months. She has given the fellow a motor-car; pays his hotel bills, takes him about with her to all sorts of places, actually goes and calls for him every night and takes him to dinner. They say that she's cut herself off from all her friends, and that she's half ruined herself. Could anything be stranger? She is a woman who must be getting on to forty years of age, and every one who knows her declares that she never had a love affair before in her life."

There was a profound silence. The Frenchman looked from face to face. Philip's last kick had been too vigorous to be ignored. He rose to his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he said gravely. "I have perhaps been indiscreet. If the lady is known to any of you I offer my profound apologies."

He bowed and made a somewhat labored departure. Harvey leaned over the table for a match and lit a cigaret.

"This is very terrible if it is true," he observed. "Psychologically, however, as the young man remarks, it is interesting."

From across the room Mildred's eyes were distended with the stare of the terrified woman. As though she had heard every word, she had followed the Frenchman's story. She held out her glass to her companion.

"Fill this with champagne," she begged. "Drink with me quickly."

"What troubles you, dear madame?" he asked with almost insolent tenderness.

"A ghost," she faltered.

Afterward, of deliberation, Grace and Harvey wandered arm in arm back to the hotel alone. She clung tightly to him.

"You are not unhappy, Harvey?" she whispered.

"Not for one second," he assured her. "There wasn't a thing in life out of which Mildred didn't cheat me. She even tried at the last to cheat me out of the greatest happiness in the world. I am sorry for her. I could never have any other feeling."

Grace looked cautiously behind, so did Harvey. Their lips met.

"Thank God, that she failed," Grace murmured fervently.

THE END

Home

A Vignette of the Sea

By Thomas Langan

HIS name was Carl.

The first time I spoke to him he was seated on a niggerhead on the poop deck, looking out to sea. We were four days out of Philadelphia, on our way to Santander, Spain, carrying fifty thousand barrels of oil. The ship was fighting against a nasty sea and seemed to be enjoying the combat.

I walked over to where Carl was sitting and I asked him for a match. I did not want a match, but here was this lonesome looking young fireman who a few minutes before had been fighting all over the mess room with the Filipino mess boy, and I had admired the quick, neat way he laid the mess boy out on a table, and the perfect poise with which he desisted when the mess boy hollered for mercy. I wanted to talk with him. He was a handsome, blond lad, and he looked so much like the American collegiate type that one was always surprised to hear his twisted, broken speech.

He laughed when I mentioned the fight.

"Dot was nutting, dot fight. Wat for I should hurt him? I don't fight wit him at all, but he run at me. You saw dot. But he should bring it bread, like I say, and he should bring it quick bread. I was one time mess boy and I know. Dot was nutting for to fight about. But I must fight, because he run at me." Carl gave a short laugh, and continued: "He bite me, too, dot mess. Yeah, sure. Here, on the arms he bite me. He bite like hal."

Then he was looking out to sea again, and I could tell that he was thinking of something far removed from the mess room of an oil tanker.

Presently he spoke; not to me, exactly, but sort of out into the air:

"I'm going home, dis trip. Two years now I'm sail around. Two years I don't go home. Dis trip I go."

Then he was telling me his story, in that way that seamen find themselves telling each other their stories. He had sailed out of Hamburg two years before as mess boy on a cargo ship. He had jumped the ship at Galveston and since then he had done intermittent shore work and had taken random trips; to Cuba, Rouen, Calais, Porto Rico. . . .

"But all the time I tink about go home. Dis trip, from Santander, I can jump him. Den I go home."

And he painted for me a sketchy word-picture of his people and his home. He lived in a little town near Essen, in the Ruhr Valley. He and his father worked together in the coal mines. Carl was eighteen when his father died, and a year later his mother married again. There was dancing and feasting at Carl's house on the wedding night. But Carl was thinking of his father, and he took no part of it.

"You tink I could go to dot wedding? Not me! Dot night when I come home from work, right away I wash me up, dress me up, go up town. I go to saloon. Half a mark entrance. All right. For half a mark more I buy four, five glasses beer. I sit around, listen to music. Den I go back to the house."

At the house the merriment was at its height, and they wanted Carl to join in the fun, but he felt that he couldn't.

"The new fadder is dere, and he say to me, 'Come on, Carl, come on drink 'im beer. Drink wit you fadder.'

"I get mad den. I get mad like hal. And I say to him, 'Never you tink *you* can be my fadder!' Den I go out of house, make trip to Hamburg, go up sea. But I wonder now how he is, the new fadder, and how is the mudder. The sister, too. Little sister I have. . . . But most of all I wonder about the fadder and the mudder, does he take care of her. . . . Well, I go below now, get some sleep. I see you again."

MANY a night when I was tired after a hard day in the engine room I would lie in my bunk and listen to Carl and wish that he would go back to his room and let me sleep. I was working as a wiper and was the only wiper on board, the other having missed the ship after signing on in Philadelphia. We had a first engineer who demanded the work of two men from the body of one, but Carl seemed to enjoy these talks so much that I never had the heart to cut him short.

The ship battled its way across the North Atlantic, the mess boy remained calm and subservient, and when we were ten days out there descended upon the crew that peace that comes at the half way mark of a voyage.

Carl and I would loll on the poop deck after supper, when the weather permitted, and we would watch the sun drop into the sea. About eight o'clock we would wander down to the mess room, where several members of the crew held forth at stud poker. Cards interested neither Carl nor myself, but we did like to raid the lunch that was set out for the night watches. With our provender of sandwiches we would go to my room where we would remain until Carl went to catch a nap before going on watch. He would work from midnight until four in the morning, and from noon until four in the afternoon.

In the evenings, as we sat together on deck or in my room he would tell me episodes of his youth, and I could readily understand his feeling of unrest and his longing to get back home.

"One summer I work on a farm near Hamburg. I was picking cherries there, red cherries and black cherries. It is nice there in the summer." There was a pause then, and his eyes took on that far away look: "Everything is green there. . . ."

Then, with sudden scorn: "Not like on this ship, only water. . . . There, you walk along, and if you hungry, you reach up and eat him."

As he spoke, Carl made motions to indicate how he would reach up and eat, that is to say, "drink" the large bunches of cherries while he worked at picking them. And it was pleasant to think of Carl there in the cherry orchard of a summer afternoon, picking large bunches of the luscious fruit, and every now and then pausing to "drink" a bunch.

EVERY so often, his homesickness would become acute: "Port, port, port, I wish we was there." His words kept time to the throb of the engine, which vibrated through the ship. "Port, port, port. That's all I tink. On watch, at mess, in the bunk. Port, port, port. I wish we was there."

Then, suddenly: "Where is it, your home?"

"I live in New York."

"Oh, hal! I don't like New York. He is too big. I was one time in New York. But I don't know nobody. I don't know where to go. I tink I go to Broadway, but I don't know where he is, dis Broadway. I gonna take taxi, but hal! when people see you don't know nutting, they stick you. In New York they stick you, but not in Philly . . . wait!" And then he darted to his room, to return with a small satin-covered box, which he handled very carefully. And he took from the box three tawdry pieces of jewelry, and very eagerly, fingering the jewels the while, he poured out the words:

"Last trip I come off the ship in Philly and I go uptown. I have money, but I don't know where to go. I see crowd of people in a store. I go in. They say, 'One dollar.' 'Two dollar.' Then they get him. I see dese tings, den I bet, too. All right. 'One dollar.' 'Two.' Pretty soon 'Five dollar.' From five dollar he go to ten dollar. I don't like dot so much, but is nice tings, naa? and so I bet fifteen dollar. Sixteen dollar. Seventeen dollar. Oh, hal! Twenty dollar I bet, and den I get him."

Almost reverently he handed over for my inspection the three tawdry pieces of jewelry. He had paid twenty dollars for a "gold" watch, a "pearl" necklace, and a lady's "diamond" ring.

"Is all right, naa?"

"Sure," I said, looking at the trinkets. "Sure, Carl. That's good stuff. What are you going to do with it?"

"My little sister, she thirteen, no, fourteen years old. For her the necklace. I like dot best." And he laughed as he put the necklace around his own neck. "For the mudder, the ring. For myself, the watch."

Perhaps I let my opinion of the things show in my face, for he asked, like a small child:

"Is all right, naa? Is wort twenty dollar, all dese tings?"

"Sure, Carl, sure." I felt that I was not lying adequately enough. "You know, those are just the kind of stores where you can pick things up cheap."

He seemed heartened by this remark, and a quick smile illuminated his face.

"Oh, I'm so glad I bring someting home from America! I was going to buy dresses and like dot, but I don't know how big."

Then he took the necklace and held it up to the light. "See now," he cried, "look now. Real purls, I tink naa?" Then he held the little cheap ring to the light: "You tink it's diamond, maybe?"

"I think it is, Carl. You got some good stuff there." And then, my master stroke, "I don't suppose you'd sell any of it? I'd give you twenty-five for it."

"Na, na, I don't sell him. I keep him."

But his faith in the trinkets was strengthened by this offer, and he sat there smiling and very carefully putting the jewels back into the satin-covered box.

THE ship chugged on, the sea became smooth, watch followed watch, and soon the "shore feeling" was beginning to pervade the crew. Supper, usually a silent ritual, was enlivened by recitals of wild times enjoyed in other ports; episodes dealing with wine and women began to pick up speed; every one entered into a detailed discussion of the fact that some fishing smacks had been sighted that afternoon.

And across the mess table Carl looked at me and said:

"Seven more watches. Seven more watches."

That night was a still, black night. It seemed, when Carl and I came up on deck, as though the world ended at the rails of the ship. Beyond that all was black, velvet black and still. The only sound was the throb of the engine and the swish of the ship's wake.

Suddenly Carl said:

"Last night I dream I die."

"Oh, nonsense, Carl." I did not like the way he blurted the words out. It seemed as though he were worrying about the dream, and had worried so much that he decided to tell me about it, even though he was ashamed of his fears. So I tried to dismiss the matter lightly. "You don't need to worry about dying. You're big and strong."

"Yeah, sure. Outside, I'm big and strong. Outside, but not inside." He rapped his chest with his fist. "In Chermany, doctor tells me, take 'im milk, take 'im eggs, take 'im fresh air."

"Oh, hell, there's nothing the matter with you, Carl. If you were really going to die you'd know it. You'd have some ache or pain. . . ."

He rapped his chest again.

"The odder night he pain like hal. I can't sleep wit the pain."

I made no immediate reply to this, and we continued to sit there and look into the black night. Rain had begun to fall. Slowly. Slowly. Slowly. Drip. Drip. Drip. From the galley came the tinkle of eight bells.

"You know," said Carl, "I was just

tinking; now I am so happy to go home, and now I must die. Six years ago my brudder die. Three years ago my fadder die. Now I must die."

Then he laughed and said, "Oh, well, if I die, I die." But there was a false note in his voice, and his laugh was a hollow laugh. We turned in soon after, but as I lay in my bunk I seemed to hear hollow laughter echoing through the ship, and I could not fall asleep. I was thinking of Carl, down in the fire room, his head aching with the throb of the thought: "Home, home. Port, port. Home, home. Home to die."

THE next morning I was awakened by Carl as he thrust his head into my room and shouted: "Land! Look! Look! Out the port-hole, land!"

I leaned over to the port-hole, and through sleepy eyes I caught a glimpse of the coast of Spain.

Carl was shouting: "Come up on deck. See better."

I dressed quickly and went up, not so much to see land as to see if Carl was still worried and fearful. His manner should have told me. All worries and fears had vanished.

"Oh boy!" he enthused. "Dot's pretty, naa?"

It was very pretty. The shore line was a low mountainous one, often hidden in white clouds. The sea was a beautiful blue, and the ship was chugging on as a horse will trot to the stable after you unharness him.

"Dis time tomorrow we be tied up."

Carl continued to gaze, fascinated, toward land, until the bell called us to breakfast. As we passed along the alleyway to the mess room he darted into a sailor's room to catch, from the port-hole, another view of the shore.

After supper that night we all went forward to draw money, and I missed Carl in the general confusion that attends this rite. I found him later, in his accustomed place on the poop deck. He looked tired and sick. His face was moist and drawn. I spoke, but for a minute he seemed not to hear. "Hey!" I shouted. "What are you thinking about?"

"I tink maybe jump overboard, swim to shore."

For a moment I thought he meant it, and perhaps he did. But later that night he said:

"Now it don't seem so hard. One more watch only."

AT DAWN the next day we were tied up, and the nightmare of being in a foreign port had begun. All the men who were not on watches, and some who were, made their way down the gang-plank and out into the city, and what followed formed the material for forecastle conversation, mess room disputes, and arguments before shipping commissioners, for days to come. We stayed in Santander all of that day, leaving at three o'clock on the following afternoon.

And in the general confusion of bathing, dressing, and hurrying to get ashore, I never saw Carl to say good-by to him, nor did I meet him anywhere uptown.

I was thinking of him as we put out to sea. I was sweeping up the machine shop near the fireman's room, when suddenly a voice called to me. I looked into the room and there was Carl, lying in his bunk.

"Where you was uptown? I look for you the whole day and the whole night. Never did I have such a good time. With Whitey, I was, Whitey, the oiler. We go to dance hall, drink 'im beer. Good beer. And dance. Wit all the gurls we dance. Never did I have such a good time. Whitey is in his room now. I carry him on board. The first engineer is mad like hal, but dot don't make difference. Never did I have such a good time. . . ."

He must have read my question in my eyes, for his manner suddenly changed and he said slowly:

"Every trip I tink I go home, but every trip I have good time, go back up sea . . ." Then, like a guilty child he continued:

"To my gurl I gave it the necklace. To Whitey's gurl I gave it the ring. The watch I trow away because I fall down and break him."

He was silent then, and into his eyes there came that dreamy, far-away look. When he spoke he spoke in a low voice, as though talking to himself:

"Too long now I sail around. Next trip I go home. . . ."

Escape

A Story of the North and of a Man Who had Loved too Well

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

KIRMA, being a lead dog, and therefore intelligent, should have known better. But she never had learned to like this last master; he was silent and stern, with never a cheery word or a pat on the head to offer. And, so, being hungry and cold, and savage on account of these things, Kirma made her mistake.

As the man passed her she crouched for an instant and then leaped silently for his throat. Instinctively he dodged, and Kirma's gleaming, slavering fangs slashed his face instead of his throat.

Kirma felt her teeth tear through skin, muscle, cartilage; tasted the salty blood. The instant her feet struck the ground she turned to leap again, green flame flickering in her eyes. The other dogs were barking, yapping and growling like some demoniac, cheering chorus. But she was too slow.

Without a word, and without even seeming to make a sudden motion, the man drew his revolver. Somehow, through the welter of blood that poured down over his eyes, he lined up the sights and fired.

The bullet caught Kirma between the eyes, and instead of leaping she merely surged forward, snarled, and then fell writhing in the snow. For a few seconds she kicked spasmodically, gasping and growling, then she quivered and lay still. The other dogs, cowed momentarily by the report of the gun, set up a dismal, frightened whimpering, which the man silenced by one sharp word of command. Then he prodded the body with the toe of his boot, to make sure that his bullet had done its work completely, and turned back to the fire.

The man was a terrible sight in the wavering red light of the fire. The dog's fangs had raked his entire face in a great diagonal sweep, tearing, mangling, disfiguring. Blood, black in the light of the fire, streamed down his face and dripped from his chin and the sharp angle of his lean jaw, onto his tattered mackinaw. But he made no complaint, and his movements as he worked around the fire were as deliberate as though he were cooking an ordinary midday meal.

Carefully he melted some snow, heating the resulting water until it was comfortably warm, and pouring into it a small quantity of some black and odorous antiseptic that he secured from a small box in his pack on the toboggan. The water turned milky, and sent up a cloud of cleanly, pungent steam. From the same box that had held the antiseptic the man secured a tuft of cotton from a small roll wrapped in blue paper. He wet the cotton in the steaming antiseptic solution, and started systematically swabbing his bleeding face, using a small metal mirror to guide him.

The harsh but efficient antiseptic bit into the raw flesh, and despite himself the man winced now and then, as the cleansing swab swept some particularly sensitive spot. But not a word did he utter.

Tall and gaunt, even to the point of emaciation, Frederick Wellington possessed a strangely commanding figure that had in it more than a hint of the military. His eyes were blue; not the pale blue eyes of the nonentity, nor the warm, merry blue eyes of the *bon-vivant*, but the icy, penetrating blue gray eyes that go with thin lips, a lean jaw, and hard, heavy fists.

After methodically cleansing his wounds to his satisfaction, Wellington methodically put things back in the pack and made ready for the night.

The fire, built on two rotten logs laid on top of the snow, was burning low. The man tossed on some birch bark that burst almost instantly into flame, and then a piece at a time, piled the fire high with wood from the store he had gathered before dark. His poncho was already strung up between a couple of convenient trees, as a windbreak, and it took but a moment to break out his big rabbit-skin sleeping robe and roll up in its voluminous, comfortable folds.

The intolerable burning and smarting of his wounds made it impossible for him to sleep, and for a long time he lay staring moodily at the fire. After a time, convinced that merciful sleep would not come, he searched through his pockets and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. They were an expensive, imported brand, and the package was worn and soiled from long travel.

Carefully Wellington drew out one of the few remaining cigarettes, inserted it between his lips, and replaced the package. Reaching out he picked up a small dry branch, the other end of which was in the fire, and carefully applied the glowing tip of the stick to the cigarette.

With the air of a connoiseur he inhaled deeply, emitting the mellow smoke from his nostrils in twin streams.

"That," he murmured dreamily, "is something like!" He started to smile, and an outraged muscle, furrowed by one of Kirma's fangs, sent a sharp protest raging along a quivering nerve.

"Odd," mused Wellington, contemplating a swirling cloud of cigarette smoke in the light of the fire. "Odd that it was a female that did it. One in the beginning, and it looks rather as if it would be one in the end, for without shelter, and the thermometer where it has been the last few weeks, these wounds will get worse instead of better, even if they don't become infected. If I could get to some trapper's cabin, where I wouldn't be recog—*by* ——!"

A sudden glad light came into the icy blue eyes, and a wraith-like smile for a moment haunted the thin, grim lips.

"My own mother wouldn't recognize me now!" whispered the man, suddenly exultant. "Frederick Wellington—and his record!—died by Kirma's fangs! The Mounties and the P.P.s can call off the dogs, by ——!"

For a long time Wellington lay staring up into the midnight sky; lay there until the cigarette smoldering between his fingers burned him.

He threw away the cigarette and buried himself more comfortably in his sleeping robe.

"Frederick Wellington—is dead," he muttered, sleepily. "Dead!"

THE next morning Wellington was on his way long before the gray dawn crept up from the frozen wastes to the south and east. The agonizing pain of his lacerated face made sound sleep impossible, and he had slept only by fits and starts. The sooner he found a warm, snug shelter, the better off he would be, and he knew it.

The team was fractious, at first, restless and hard to drive without Kirma, but Wellington finally made the snarling, sullen brutes understand that they were to mush on without Kirma up ahead, and by noon they were making fairly good time.

Twice they stopped while Wellington made himself something hot to eat and drink. Once he tossed the dogs some scraps of frozen moose meat, hide and all, which the always ravenous dogs gulped down with amazing speed. But the stops were short, and Wellington pressed the dogs unmercifully whenever the going was good, to make up for the time lost in stopping.

The ceaseless agony of his lacerated face made every move a separate agony, but he kept on doggedly, only his eyes betraying his suffering.

He was heading almost due east, and late in the afternoon he struck Fisher Lake, cut across its northern end, and up Jack Pot River. Some eight or nine miles from the mouth of the little, tortuous stream, was the headquarters camp of one Sadi Lecompte, a French-Canadian trapper of doubtful antecedents and the mind of a child. Wellington had met Sadi once—before the taloned hand of the Law had reached out after Wellington—and he remembered that somebody had remarked upon the good location Sadi had, up Jack Pot.

Knowing that ofttimes trappers conceal their cabins as much as possible, so as not to invite the attention of passing Indians and others, Wellington kept a sharp lookout through the rapidly falling dusk, and urged his tired dogs into a half-hearted trot.

At last they swung around a heavily wooded bend and saw, straight ahead, a dim yellow rectangle of light, that could only emanate from a window.

"Good!" murmured Wellington. "I was lucky to catch Sadi at his camp. I might have gone right by it, in the dark, if he had not been there, with a light going. Perhaps my luck has changed at last!"

He was rather surprised, upon approaching the cabin, that his coming was not heralded by Sadi's dogs; indeed, he was at the very door of the cabin before he saw or heard any kind of life. Then there was the sound of the door being unlatched, and the door itself swung open, to silhouette a woman's figure. She peered out into the darkness, evidently unable to identify her visitor.

"Sadi?" she asked, hesitatingly.

Wellington, surprised beyond measure at the apparition of a woman, recovered himself instantly and swept off his fur cap, bowing.

"Not Sadi, madam, but a friend of Sadi's, and in trouble. I wonder—" and he stepped closer, so that his scarred face was visible in the yellow light that streamed through the doorway—"if I might beg shelter and warmth?"

The woman choked a scream as she saw Wellington's disfigured face, the ghastly wounds twisted and blackened by the biting cold.

"*Mon Dieu!* m'sieur, you are wound—hurt, *oui?* So terribly! Come in, to the warm. I will attend. . . . "

And so it was that Wellington came to the camp of Sadi Lecompte.

The next afternoon Sadi himself arrived in camp, his wizened face red and jovial; his black, bristling little mustache white with frost. He hailed his visitor with the enthusiasm of his race and a hospitality born of many lonely days.

"*Sacré bleu!* M'sieur Bell"—that was the new name Wellington had adopted—"I can not express it, my plaisure!" protested Sadi after Wellington's story had been told and exclaimed over.

"My wife, Jeanette, she is as good as the docteur, yes? Soon the face be so good as new, m'sieur. Perhaps not so *jolie*"—and Sadi shrugged expressively—"but as well as the docteur himself could make it, *hein?*"

Wellington nodded gravely.

"Madame Lecompte has been an angel of mercy," he acknowledged. "The pain is nearly gone, and in a few days I shall be as fit as a fiddle, thanks to madam's skill." And he bowed gracefully in the direction of the buxom and not unattractive Jeanette, who stood watching him, drinking in his words of praise avidly.

Sadi grinned delightedly, and threw a clumsy arm around his wife's shoulders. Jeanette started as though he had struck her, and the light that had been in her dark eyes died away. But Sadi did not notice. He patted one rounded shoulder caressingly, his grin broadening.

"You must know, m'sieur, we are jus' married before we come into the bush this fall. This is like our what you call honeymoon, yes?" And he chuckled as though at a good joke.

So that was it! thought Wellington. Sadi had not been married when Wellington had met him, a year or two ago. Well, for a bride, Jeanette did not seem particularly ardent. Instinctively his eyes sought the subject of his thoughts, and Wellington noted with a little start that Jeanette's brooding eyes were fixed upon his own. A slow, cynical smile hovered for an instant around Wellington's scarred lips. He had seen that look in women's eyes before.

"You are to be envied," he said slowly, addressing his remark to Sadi. "It is not many men that are lucky enough to find a woman who will go into the wilderness with them, away from pretty clothes and the parties and dances, is it not so?"

"*Oui!*" chuckled Sadi proudly. "Indeed eet ees so, m'sieur. I am the most fortunate of men, me!"

Jeanette flashed a sly glance at Wellington and made a little *moue* of distaste. Something inside him warned Wellington that he was venturing into dangerous territory.

"I should think, madam, that you would be afraid to spend so much time here alone in this great lonesome country," he remarked.

"Afraid? Of what, *mon Dieu?*" flashed Jeanette. "I miss the good times, the music, my friends, yes; but afraid, no! There ees nothing of which to be afraid, no?"

"How about bad men?" asked Wellington casually. "Men like this Wellington, who is wanted by the police, and is said to be a very bad one?"

"I have met M'sieur Wellington," put in Sadi, eagerly. "He ees veree pleasant; he does not look at all like a murderer, that one."

"Oh, tell me about heem!" exclaimed Jeanette. "These bad men, these men of adventure, they are interest, yes?"

WELLINGTON nodded negligently, smiling.

"I do not know heem all, the story," began Sadi. "As I understan', this Wellington, he ees a gentleman one tam. He ees ver' much what we say 'a devil with the ladies', yes? A lady who ees high in Montreal, a *grande dame*, makes eyes at this Wellington. He make love to her, and I think for firs' time he heemself fell in love.

"Anyway, pretty soon he find his lady ees play the flirt. She have no deep love for heem, for nobody. One night, when she tire of him, he watch. He see her make love to another man, just as she make eet with heem—*Sacré bleu!* You are ill, m'sieur?"

Sadi started forward, sudden anxiety shining in his eyes. Wellington shook his head; his face, that had gone suddenly white a moment before, throwing the scars into horrible relief, slowly resumed its natural color.

"It is nothing, I assure you," said Wellington calmly. He reached into a pocket and brought forth the worn packet of expensive, imported cigarettes. "A sudden twinge of pain—from an old wound, that was all. Will you smoke?"

"*Merci!* I smoke only my old pipe, and not heem ver' much," Sadi refused the proffered cigarettes.

Wellington took one of the three remaining cigarettes, putting the package away carefully. Methodically he tapped the end of the cigarette on the back of his left hand. "Won't you go on with your story?" he suggested. As Sadi began again Wellington lighted his cigarette and closed his eyes, inhaling great lungs full of the rare, delightful, familiar aroma. What a little thing it took to bridge time! With eyes closed and the scent of the expensive tobacco in his nostrils, Wellington was no longer in Sadi's little shack; his mind was a whirlwind of fleeting impressions, voices, scenes—all from another world. A world where one changed one's linen, ate from silver and fine china, set upon snowy napery. . . .

It was all over in an instant, and Sadi's mild voice was registering on Wellington's consciousness.

"—— he was probably crazee, you say. But a man who ees young and in love, he ees very strange; he do wild things. And so he choke the life out of her with hees two hands, so!" Sadi's muscular, hairy hands made as though to clasp a throat, and tightened spasmodically to add a touch of reality to the grim pantomime.

"After he keel, he become ver' frightened, they say—although this M'sieur Wellington do not look to me like a so great coward—and come out here.

"We know not the story at first, of course. Then the police come, and they tell us, but by then, M'sieur Wellington, he ees gone! And for two, most t'ree years, he has stay' gone, and the police catch him not yet. He ees a sly one; a ver' sly one, that M'sieur Wellington!"

"But a coward!" said Jeanette disdainfully. "He ees no real man, to run so!"

"But you must understan'," argued Sadi. "The law, you cannot fight it and win. You must run, or —— *pouf!*" Sadi made an eloquent gesture. "*Tout finis!*"

"The law," remarked Wellington slowly, "is a peculiar thing. It makes mistakes; terrible blunders.

"Suppose, for example, that it was not Wellington at all that did the killing? Suppose the husband of this lady had had his eyes opened at last, and had himself avenged the dishonor?"

"But they say," replied Sadi triumphantly, "that M'sieur Wellington was seen going into the garden where the madam was found dead. And he left the city that same night. And m'sieur, the husband of the lady, he was in bed; so know nothing until morning."

"Suppose," returned Wellington in the same soft, slow voice, "that Wellington had merely gone to the garden in the hope of finding the woman there, and had found her, even as he hoped—but not alone? Suppose that instead of choking her, as was supposed, he had merely sickened to the heart of him, and fled the garden, the city, everything, anything, to get away from her and the memories that haunted him? Suppose that!"

Sadi cowered a little at the vehemence with which Wellington had ended.

"But how—"

"Easy enough. The lover leaves madam at last. M'sieur the husband sees it all. When the lover is gone, he takes her white throat in his hands and presses. A few moments—she is dead. He retires, and sleeps well until morning. The murder is discovered. The gossips of the town put two and two together. The man who has left town must have done it, of course. That is very plain, is it not, M'sieur Lecompte?" And for the first time in over two years, Frederick Wellington laughed aloud. It was not a pleasant thing to hear.

Somewhat startled by Wellington's words, Sadi nodded confusedly.

"*Oui!* Plain. Ver' plain. But the police, they would never believe, *hein?*"

Wellington dropped the cigarette onto the floor and ground out the coal with the toe of his moccasin.

"No. The police would never believe," he said thoughtfully.

AT LAST Wellington's wounds were healed sufficiently so that he was almost ready to undertake the long journey out of the bush, and into the company of other men of his own kind. His eagerness to go back increased every hour; he had never fully realized how he had hated the vast silent, white reaches of the cruel north until now, when his enforced exile was almost over.

Of course, the company of Sadi was better by far than the everlasting silence and loneliness of bush, with only the dogs for company, but then, Sadi was busy with his traps, and spent but little time in the cabin.

Sadi's wife Wellington kept at arm's length. He knew her for the primitive, passionate, elemental type of woman whose love is no more constant than the wind, and yet is as fierce as the hate of a weasel. More than once, and with increasing frequency as the long days dragged by, Wellington had seen a look in the woman's eyes that told him as plainly as words could have done, that she did not look upon him with disfavor.

In order to get out of the cabin as much as possible, and to partially repay Sadi for his hospitality, Wellington had started a little trap line of his own, one that he could cover easily in four or five hours on snowshoes. This line of traps tapped territory Sadi had condemned as being no good, but Wellington made it yield surprisingly well.

"I am surprise' ver' much, M'sieur Bell," admitted Sadi. "Las' fall I look careful; I study all the land aroun', and I find over on the ridge where are your traps no sign that our little frien's are working there. And *voila!* You set the traps there and bring back many nice pelts. Tomorrow I will go weeth you and see how you work the miracle, m'sieur. You are the trapper *par excellence!*"

"Bosh, Sadi! You're ten times the trapper I am! All I know I picked up from a couple of breeds last winter."

Sadi wagged his head smilingly. "M'sieur is too modest," he remarked to Jeanette. "Ees eet not so, *ma chère?*"

Jeanette lifted her large dark eyes slowly. Her glance as it swept Wellington was luminous.

"M'sieur Bell ees vairy modest," she said. "If he were more bold, he might claim—*almos' anytheeng!*"

The insinuating, intimate accent on the last words was lost upon Sadi, but not upon Wellington.

"Eet ees better as eet ees," replied Sadi. "The man who talk too much do too leetle, I have foun'."

Wellington made haste to change the subject, congratulating himself that in a day or so he would be ready to leave for the outside. That this passionate, primitive woman was fairly throwing herself at him he could not doubt, and Wellington was not unaware of the danger in affronting a woman like Sâdi's wife. Tomorrow he would go out with Sadi, and show him the little trap line, and then, the very next day, he would harness up his dogs and mush on. He had not intended to go for several days yet, but he realized the danger of remaining longer near the eager Jeanette.

The next morning was clear and cold, ideal weather for snowshoes. The snow was as dry and powdery as salt, and it crisped and slithered under the webs of the two men as they strode along. The dogs, trotting gaily ahead, made easy work of hauling Sadi's lightly loaded toboggan.

"Hello! Who do you suppose that could have been?" Wellington pointed ahead to a trail that crossed at an acute angle the one they were following. "Any other trappers around here likely to pay you a visit?" The old fear of a strange trail, born in the man who had been hunted like a beast by the grim and tireless representatives of the law, flamed up in Wellington's breast.

"*Non.* There ees no other trapper in many miles, and here we pay no viesets. Eet ees a hard business, trapping, and in the season there ees no time for plaisure. At Christmas, perhaps we go down to the post to the pow-wow, *oui;* and in the spring, we make ver' merry, but—*non*, m'sieur, I t'ink that is no other trapper."

They were close to the intersecting trail now, and Sadi examined it with care.

"*Voila!* I have eet! Theese is the trail of M'sieur Doyle, of the Provincial Poleece; see the ver' narrow toboggan he uses. M'sieur Doyle, he calls at my cabin whenever he ees near. *Bien!* We shall have company theese night; M'sieur Doyle is ver' droll, ver' funee. . . ."

BUT Wellington's mind was no longer on the chattering, voluble Sadi's words. A Provincial Policeman at the camp! Tonight he would have to face one of those lean hounds that had been on his trail so many, many bitter months. Would his hideous scars be the effectual disguise he had thought they would be? Would he be asked to give an account of himself, and if so, what would he say? Would he be "turned up" after all these weary days and nights of suffering? Would he—"

"*Sacrê bleu!* A marten, and a fine one in the ver' first trap!" exclaimed Sadi, breaking in upon Wellington's agonized reverie.

The trap was one of the few steel ones Wellington had put out, most of his sets being snares fixed to balance poles, as is the usual method in that country. The marten was still alive and full of fight, and as the two men approached it drew back as far as the chain of the trap would allow, crouching low, its eyes blazing with fear and hate.

"Eh, my angry one!" laughed Sadi, drawing his revolver and cocking it. "Hold quiet but one short moment now. . . ."

Keeping his eyes on the infuriated animal, Sadi took another step forward. As he did so his web caught on a snow-buried branch, and he stumbled, trying to regain his balance.

Caught unawares, and tripped by the anchored web which he could not tear free, Sadi plunged forward awkwardly in the snow. As he struck, there was the sound of a muffled report, and a hoarse scream burst from Sadi's throat. Then, while Wellington stared in startled horror, Sadi's body twitched once or twice, and then seemed to settle more comfortably into the soft snow. He had fallen upon the cocked revolver, and in doing so, had instinctively tightened the grip of his fingers upon the revolver, discharging it.

After a time Wellington stooped and slowly rolled the body over. Not that it was necessary, for Wellington had seen men die before. Wellington came honestly by that little hint of the military that was part of his personality.

One glance was enough. Carefully, even tenderly, Wellington placed the limp body on the toboggan and turned the restless, nervous dogs around to the back trail. Then, through the white and strangely silent bush, the little procession wound its way back to the cabin.

THERE was an unfamiliar, narrow toboggan in the clearing surrounding the cabin, and a team of huskies, savage, tawny, snarling brutes, were tied not far away.

Wellington's heart pounded against his ribs. He was no coward, and yet to come with such a burden, and face the law he had eluded for so long, taxed his fiber to the utmost.

Automatically he noted that there was smoke coming from the roof of the bathhouse, that little log hut, containing a crude rock fireplace which is heated until water turned upon it turns to soothing, cleansing steam, that is part of the facilities of every white trapper's headquarters camp facilities. That would be the policeman, and Wellington sighed a little in relief as he realized that his ordeal would be a little delayed, since a steam bath is a leisurely rite, a luxury to be enjoyed in the bush.

Evidently Jeanette had not noted Wellington's return, despite the clamor of the policeman's dogs, for she turned in surprise as Wellington entered the cabin.

She read disaster upon his grave face.

"M'sieur!" she cried, her eyes larger and darker than ever in a face gone white with apprehension. "Tell me; what ees eet?"

Wellington hesitated; the words refused to come. And then at last he spoke, his voice little more than a whisper.

"Your husband—Sadi—he—had an accident in the bush. He is—"

"*He ees dead!*" broke in Jeanette. "Oh, *mon chère* Sadi! *Mon Dieu!* He ees dead, ees eet not, m'sieur?" Piteously she looked up at Wellington, her eyes flooded with tears. "How—did eet happen?"

As briefly as possibly Wellington told her, and his grave, even voice seemed to calm her, for she ceased sobbing and when he had finished her eyes were dry and bright. Quietly she watched while Wellington went outside and brought in the body of the husband, and quietly she helped him arrange the figure on his bunk, and cover the poor dead face. Then, when they had finished, she turned and faced Wellington, an odd light in her dark eyes.

"Eet was most regretable, that—accident," she said slowly, her eyes fixed on Wellington's. "But a strong man will have what he wants, ees eet not so, m'sieur?" And her eyes grew luminous with a languishing, insinuating softness.

For an instant Wellington, taken off guard, and his mind full of other things, did not understand. Then the full hellish meaning of the woman's words and glance sank home.

Jeanette retreated a step before the sudden angry fire that flashed from the man's eyes, putting up one soft brown arm as though to ward off a blow. But Wellington made no move, save to reach into an inner pocket and draw forth a flattened, battered package of cigarettes.

There were but two cigarettes left. The man chose one, tapped it lightly and lighted it. But for all his apparent quietness, his brain was seething.

"You think then," he said coldly, "that I killed Sadi?"

"M'sieur! I did not say that. I would not say that. But a man who ees strong, and love—he do not hesitate to keel. Ees eet not so!"

"No!" thundered Wellington, throwing off the restraining hand of caution. "What in God's name ever made you think I loved you? Haven't I avoided you as I would the plague? Haven't I—God!" Inarticulate with anger and loathing, he paused.

The woman's face drained white, then flushed again. She bit her under lip until the blood came, and stained her crimson lips an even angrier hue. A thousand emotions flashed from her eyes.

"Not so loud," she said, and her voice was as dry and harsh as the rustling of autumn leaves underfoot. "The policeeman, M'sieur Doyle, he weel be in soon anyway. And then"—her voice rose in a crescendo of savage triumph—"Then you will be a prisoner—*M'sieur Wellington!*"

Wellington was startled, but he did not betray the emotion. Slowly he exhaled a rolling cloud of fragrant smoke, waiting deliberately before replying.

"I told you my name was Bell," he remarked calmly.

"*Oui!* But you think that Sadi would not remember your voice? Here in the bush, where it is always so silent, the ear, it grows keen. And we of the bush hear not many voices. Those we hear—we remember. And so Sadi, he remember you.

"But Sadi, he is a soft-heart, that one. He say to me 'The man, he ees have bad luck. The story he tell of why the police are after him, it sound true to me. We weel be the friends to this man, *hein?*' And so we say nothing, but all the time we know, *oui!*"

THERE was still a chance for him, and Wellington knew it. If he would accept this woman, take her as she desired to be taken, he knew she would keep his secret. Even now it was not too late to make this woman, eager as she was to believe, think that he returned her passion. That also

Wellington knew, just as he knew that if he did not deceive her she would turn him over to Doyle.

Wellington tossed the butt of his cigarette into the little tin stove.

"Well?" he asked calmly, as the woman paused.

" 'Well?' " she mimicked him, snarling. "Well, I theenk I shall turn you over to the so kind M'sieur Doyle. I theenk he weel be ver' glad to see you, M'sieur Wellington."

Wellington picked up his rifle, his eyes glinting coldly.

"Most of my duffle is right here," he remarked, picking up a shapeless canvas pack that stood in one corner. "The dogs are outside all ready to go, and they're fresh as daisies. I guess, madam, your friend M'sieur Doyle will have to wait a while!"

"*So?*" The door was flung suddenly open, and into the little cabin stepped a man in the uniform of the Provincial Police. "I don't know who you are, mister, but I heard you mention my name, and as I don't like waiting, I took the liberty of buttin' in." With gun ready for instant action, Doyle looked from the man to the woman and back again, seeking an explanation.

The woman was the first to speak.

"Oh, M'sieur Doyle!" she exclaimed eagerly. "I am so ver' glad you came! Theese man"—and she pointed dramatically to Wellington—"he ees ver' bad. I theenk he keel Sadi here, and beside that he ees the M'sieur Wellington that you policemans look for so long tam."

Doyle looked over his prisoner curiously.

"So you're Wellington, eh? Don't look much like your pictures! What kind of beauty culture was you trying?"

"A dog did it," replied Wellington, and his voice sounded strangely mechanical. "And while my name's Wellington—I didn't kill Sadi here." And very briefly, in the same dull, unnatural voice, he outlined the accident.

Jeanette listened stonily, her eyes scornful and stormy. When Wellington had finished, Doyle went over to the bunk and made a brief examination of the body.

"I guess, Jeanette, you're mistaken about Wellington shooting poor old Sadi. Judging from where that bullet went in and where it came out, and the powder burns, it happened just as he says."

Jeanette's face fell, and some of the savage exultation disappeared from her eyes.

"But just the same, he ees M'sieur Wellington!" she exclaimed. "He goes back with you, a prisoner, *hein?*"

Doyle studied the woman curiously, and then glanced at Wellington, a quizzical smile curling the corners of his mouth.

"I don't think I quite get the situation here," he remarked. "But as for Wellington going back with me, he can do as he pleases about that, I guess! Some of his friends outside didn't seem to be convinced that he did the killing. So they got busy and applied some pressure, and got the woman's husband to confess. He did it himself; jealous, as I get it.

"Anyway, the word came through a month ago; maybe more. We ain't been looking for you for quite some time, brother!"

Jeanette spat out something in her native French; words that fairly crackled with bitterness, and then, with the inborn inconsistency of her nature, flung herself weeping on her knees beside her husband's body.

A decade of years seemed to slide from Wellington as the import of Doyle's words registered on his consciousness, and to think that it was the woman's betrayal that had brought out the glorious news! The grim lines around his lips softened, and the harshness of his glance faded.

Slowly he reached into an inner pocket and drew out a worn, crumpled cigarette package. The lone cigarette that was left he proffered to Doyle.

The policeman looked longingly at the aristocratic name on the package, but shook his head smilingly.

"Never take a man's last cigarette," he said.

Wellington laughed; a hearty, joyous laugh that it was good to hear.

"You'll take this one!" he replied. "I'm on my way outside where there are lots of them!"

Everybody's

Meeting PLACE

Where it is suggested writers, readers and the editors gather for informal discussion

WHAT do you think of the change in EVERYBODY'S? Now wait a minute before you hurl the bricks, bottles, or whatever may be handy.

Before you answer read some of the stories in this issue. They are good stories aren't they? They are corking stories! And if the Great American Public likes anything better than a good story, what is it?

EVERYBODY'S had to change and change quickly. The most logical thing to do—and it had to be done overnight—was to make it an all fiction magazine. At the same time it was advisable to make sure that the fiction was of a fine, adventurous, stirring quality.

So with this brief explanation let us tell you something about these stories and their authors. Of course everybody is a bit fed up with this autobiographical stuff including most authors. We are featuring in this issue Thomson Burtis's novelette "The Air Rangers" and therefore it is apropos to quote what he wrote us when we asked for a word or two about himself:

> As to the autobiographical stuff—I really much prefer the third person because I have dished out so much of this "I was and did" junk. I will tell you something about this story, however. Penoch O'Reilly is based on one of several similar types I have met knocking around—indomitable adventurers who have been battered into outwardly hard-boiled men who know their stuff from the ground up. The actual character is based on a combination of two men, one a flyer and the other a redhead I met in Mexico who had chummed with O. Henry in South America, got into trouble in Persia, and is now in the oil game in Mexico.

Atreus von Schrader, who wrote that capital racing yarn in this issue, also insisted on evading the first person singular. "If you will let me," he said, "I will be glad to write something about racing stories in general and in particular." And he did!

> For thirty-seven of my thirty-nine years I have known horses intimately, beginning with a crop-eared Shetland on my second birthday. For most of this time I have owned, bred, raised and trained horses. My contention is that although the horse is fine enough to be loved for what he is, more driveling rot is written into horse stories than in any others. I resent this, both as a horseman and as a writer. I accordingly heave my brick at those of my craft who find it necessary to endow the horse with a visible halo, being presumably ignorant of his many virtues.
>
> We read of horses fighting like tigers for their masters; we read of horses swimming to the rescue of their owners, to quote two recent, and ridiculous, episodes.
>
> Only a few weeks ago there appeared a yarn by a much-touted writer in which a thirty-year-old stallion led a band of wild mares, apparently his platonic playmates, hell-bent over hill and dale, not to say over cliffs. A few horses reach the age of thirty, but they do not lead wild herds of anything anywhere. This is a typical case of sheer reckless misstatement.
>
> The horse, as I know him, is a timid animal, utterly dependent once he is schooled, with a magnificent capacity for work and a patience under-punishment that puts most humans to shame. He does not reason and he is prey to panic.
>
> I have seen a three-year-old chased by a dog run head on into a tree in a field and break his neck. The individual horse is little more than a reflection of the man who has trained him. For an owner he trusts he will do almost anything, but only under immediate control. He will not plunge into the water to pull his master out. He will not, as I have read, come up from behind and attack a stranger

> who had his master covered with the inevitable revolver.
>
> As one who loves horses and knows a little about them, I should like to start The Association Against The Libel of Equus Caballus.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the other novelette that appears in this issue, "Hill of Gold," is that its author, Leslie McFarlane, is only twenty-three. And yet he has been writing for magazines for the past two years! He is a Canadian and has lived in Northern Ontario for the past sixteen years. He writes:

> Dostoyevsky and Conrad are my literary idols. I read much and have high ambitions, although an inherent laziness cripples achievement. I have had a number of novelettes and short stories published, as well as a few books for boys, the latter anonymously. My life has been the rather uninteresting one of a youngster born with an itch for scribbling, a victim to the fascination of phrases. It will probably remain so.

Another story in this issue that made a particular hit with us was "Red Cantrell's Kid" by Douglas H. Woodworth. Mr. Woodworth is an editor on the Daily *Telegram* of Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He has long been enamoured of the life of the old West. Red Cantrell in his story he says is drawn largely from life. He writes:

> I knew him as a clean-eyed, snowy-haired old timer who roamed the hills of the mining region where I worked. He had gone overland to California in '54, and had plenty of real stories to tell when one could get him started. He was born in Missouri, and had one brother in the Union army and one with the Confederates. Once he recalled with a grim smile how these two brothers had fought over a slave his father owned. And to hear the real Red Cantrell laugh was a treat—just those three short barks that could express any emotion.

We could go on endlessly describing the adventure of selecting worth while stories for this new EVERYBODY'S. For it is an adventure. Every mail brings manuscripts, into which we plunge zestfully looking for the story that we hope will give you the same thrill it does us.

You will notice on the heading of this department we said it is a gathering place for informal discussion among writers, readers, and the editors. So far, the writers and especially the editors have seized all the space. But that does not mean we do not want to hear from you, the reader. We do! Decidedly! Please come across with criticisms and comments, favorable and otherwise.

Features to Come in the January *Everybody's*

The First Chapters of a New Novel

"*Flying Kestrel*"

by

CAPTAIN DINGLE

A Complete Novelette of Adventure in Sumatra

"THE THREE MEN OVER THE HILL"

by H. Bedford-Jones

A Complete Novelette of Gun Play in the West

"RIDIN' THROUGH"

by

W. B. Corcoran

And at least seven *first-rank* short stories